

ARGOSY

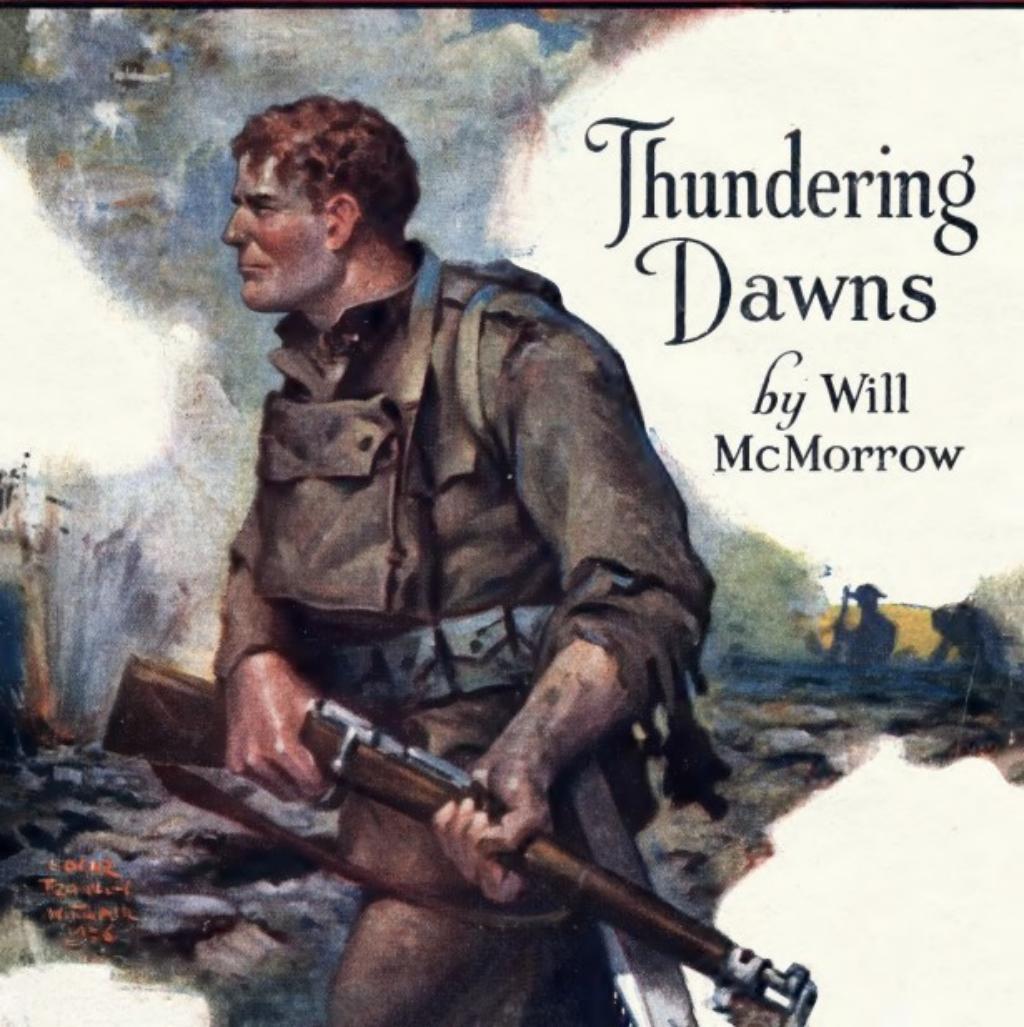
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

FEB.
12

PRICE
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Thundering Dawns

by Will
McMorrow



HOME
TRAIN
WORLD
LIVE



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O. C. ZEIGLER.

BUICK: 36 miles on $1\frac{1}{4}$ gallons.
Previously made only 8 to
10 miles per gallon.
L. R. ROBINSON.

MARMON: Averaged 20 miles
per gallon on 40-mile trip.
Previously got only 10 to
11 miles. B. O. FINCH.

DODGE: 39½ miles per gallon.
DAVID LAWSON.

STUDEBAKER: (Special
Six)
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The Stransky Vaporizer is the most sensational selling proposition of the last ten years. Full-page newspaper ads have spread the story all over America. Most car owners have heard about it. Man alive, what a money-making opportunity!

eration. Many have used it from two to seven years and still praise it. Imagine how wonderful it works when a million car owners install it—when it is sold all over America and in 29 foreign countries—when distributors compete eagerly to get it.

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So convinced is the inventor that this queer device will increase gasoline mileage and reduce cost so much that he backs this daring offer described in the coupon below. Obviously, every man will want to accept that offer. It gives you the chance to test it, to learn its妙处, to risk nothing with a cash forfeit if the test doesn't prove the story. It also brings you full details explaining why you can make as big an income, full or spare time, as other Stransky representatives. Why delay? Mail it now!

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\$48 IN THREE HOURS

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J. A. WILLIAMS.

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Dept. B-1330, Pukwana, South Dakota

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man who wants a BIG pay check!

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Auto Book, free too! Act now!

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and
3 JOB TICKETS**

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Dept. 238, Chicago

Send me absolutely FREE one week
and utilization of my 3 Lessons and 3 Job
Tickets. Also my Auto Book FREE and full partici-
pation of your 4 Outfits Offer.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

TOWN _____ STATE _____

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY W E E K L Y

VOL. CLXXXIV

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXXIV

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 1927

NUMBER 1



Thundering Dawns.

By WILL McMORROW

Author of "*The Sun-Makers*," "*Wings of Adventure*," etc.

THE AUTHOR RISES TO SAY:

WHEN a man is asked to say a few words about himself, his audience is in for a protracted speech. There has been only one man in the history of the world who had any difficulty expressing in fluent periods what he thought of himself and he was tongue-tied. For the sake of the readers of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY this will be as concise as possible.

My acquaintance with things military started at the age of ten as a private in the rear rank in a small school on the Sound. The eagle eye of the director singled me out immediately as possessing all the qualifications necessary in a private and my vocation in life was decided. After six years I was still a private—one of the chosen few. I think most of the others were majors.

I enlisted, as soon as I could, in a field artillery regiment of the New York National Guard. They threatened to make me a corporal about the time I transferred to an infantry regiment. The war in Europe came along just in time to save me from being made an infantry corporal. I took two hundred and ten unfortunate horses to France for an acquaintance of mine who said I would enjoy sea life, turned them over to the French cavalry and, in London, enlisted in the British army and wore the king's coat—which I hope fitted him better than it did me—at a shilling a day—which was poor pay for the work I had to do.

When a crowd of us started for Berlin one September morn by way of the Somme valley—recommended to us by the general in command—some German folks disputed the point at a place called Ginchy and filled me quite full of holes, utterly ruining the coat, and spoiling the party for me absolutely. I attribute the misfortune to my having been made a corporal shortly before.

On returning to the U. S. A., I attended Plattsburg in 1917, and in the confusion of the moment was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Air Service. Instead of correcting the oversight the A. G. O. promoted me to a first lieutenant. The war ended shortly after. But my career as a private had been ruined. I became an airplane salesman, a newspaper reporter, a real estate broker.

I have all the vices and few of the virtues. I don't play golf, pinochle, nor drink coffee for breakfast. I like dancing, riding, Lucky Strike cigarettes and rye. I have a red mustache and am mistaken often for a prohibition policeman at awkward moments.

So much for me.

"Thundering Dawns" is not my maiden effort for the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY readers, but I enjoyed writing it. I offer it for what it is worth, which may be little, in sober memory of the Sarsfields and Finnerans and "Celluloid Jims" who made up the backbone of our armies, the men who lived heroically and died obscurely on the barren harvest fields of Flanders and Picardy.

CHAPTER I.

TELL IT TO THE MARINES!

"OSSINING!"

O HURRIED commuters, morning newspapers in hand, straw hats jammed on perspiring foreheads, crowded aboard the train, eagerly sought the shaded side of the long car and settled into their seats, puffing their after-breakfast cigars, nodding to acquaintances, discussing business, weather, and war in amicable undertones.

Unnoticed, the man in the ill-fitting dark suit and wrinkled cap dropped into the last seat of the car. It was on the avoided sunny side, but he did not mind that; no sun could burn too hotly for a man who had spent five years in the sunless cells and work-shops of Sing Sing.

He slouched down into the plush-covered seat, and spread the newspaper he carried in front of him, striving to reduce a tall, broad-shouldered body to unobtrusive dimensions, striving to hide from the curious glance the unhealthy pallor that sat so oddly on the strong lines of jaw and forehead, the face of a fighter with the color of the sick-room.

He moved over in the seat as the train jarred to a stop and more passengers climbed aboard. A solid-looking business man puffed acknowledgment of the offer of room, read his paper in silence for a mile or so, and broke into speech with the abruptness of unrestrained enthusiasm.

"Wonderful man, Wilson! Did you read that message about the draft?"

The man in the gray cap lowered his newspaper an inch or two.

"No," he said shortly.

"Marvelous command of words—hanged if I don't think we'll do what he says, too.

He has the country behind him—men—guns—and the spirit that wins out! I wish I were twenty years younger."

He shot a sidelong look at his companion, noting the muscular hands that held the newspaper, and the glimpse of square shoulder behind it.

"You're luckier, I guess. Maybe you've been called already?" he hazarded.

"Not me," was the grim answer from behind the broad sheet.

"Really? Er—enlisted already, I suppose—"

"No," shortly; and the conversation languished.

The loquacious little man shrugged his shoulders, and retreated behind his own newspaper while the man in the shoddy clothes looked at the long columns of print in front of him without reading a single line.

His narrowed eyes seemed to look through and beyond the meaningless jumble of words to something far away, something that brought the knotted muscles of his jaws into prominence against the pallid skin.

War! What interest had he in war—while Edmund Sanderson was alive? That was his private war, to find Sanderson, the man who was responsible for those five years behind prison walls, and choke the truth out of him, the real story of what happened that night on the Jamaica Road.

Sanderson knew. He had been the ring-leader in that drunken frolic that started so peaceably in a convivial meeting of old friends, and ended in the wee hours of the morning with the mangled forms of two innocent passers-by crushed beneath the wrecked roadster, and Stewart Hull slouched behind the wheel, too stupidly intoxicated to know what had happened.

Sanderson's story on the stand had clinched the case for the prosecution. The attorneys for the defense could not shake that testimony. The defendant had broken away from the party followed by Sanderson, had climbed aboard the latter's roadster in spite of his protest, and driven away at high speed carrying Sanderson with him.

Forced to stop the car by Sanderson, the defendant had resented the interference. Blows had been exchanged. Sanderson had been left in the road while the defendant rushed away to end a half mile farther on —two lives snuffed out, and a promising career ruined.

There had been no defense to speak of. The man had admitted he was drunk, and had no recollection of the events of the night; liquor affected him like that. He did not believe he drove the car, but could prove nothing.

A weak defense surely! The judge intimated as much. Then the business of character witnesses. Young man held good position in down town banking house, promising career ahead of him, officer in a crack National Guard regiment—and so on, the lawyer for the defense weakly opposing arguments against a perfect case, and an outraged public opinion, backed by the newspapers, clamoring for an example.

One of the victims had been a prominent member of the community, making matters worse.

Then the judge, regretful but quietly determined, declared that the verdict of the jury left him no option. Defendant had been arrested twice for speeding; reckless driving must be curbed. Two deaths—one a young girl, flagrant case; community had suffered too much from this sort of thing—and so forth; seven years in the penitentiary.

And all the time Edmund Sanderson, weak mouth twitching, eyes avoiding the defendant, droning out his faultless tale complete in every detail.

Well, seven years dwindled to five with the help of the Parole Board, and he was free now to find Sanderson, and choke the true story from his cowardly lips. The jury might have been fooled, but any one that knew Sanderson could have told he

was lying—lying to save himself even if he had to send another man to prison.

Besides, there were other things to explain. Newspapers and magazines come even inside gray walls, and events had shown that Sanderson had made use of his opportunities. The marriage of the wealthy young lumber dealer and Dorothy Coates had occupied quite a half column several months back; and Dorothy Coates belonged, or should have belonged, to the man behind the walls.

Not that he cared now! A girl that ditched a man because of the consequences of one wild fling was not worth worrying about. But still things had been going too steadily to Edmund Sanderson.

Five years out of the world lost to him. Turned out an ex-convict, a convicted felon, without money or prospects of a job, with neither family nor friends to fall back upon, deprived of his rights as a citizen—and this babbling fool at his side talking of patriotism!

He crumpled the newspaper in the strong grip of his hand. The train plunged into a tunnel, and the commuters reached for their straw hats from the overhead racks.

"Another day of work," beamed the little man alongside. "Well, we've all got to do our bit, I suppose, small as it may be, eh?"

The train slowed up for the One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street station. The man in the corner stood up, tossed his paper aside, and scowled defiantly at the other.

"That's a good joke," he sneered. "I owe the country nothing. Talk that patriotic bunk to some one else. I get off here."

The smaller man was still staring back in amazement as the train pulled out.

"Most surprising statement," he murmured, looking around for corroboration, "in these days and times. Imagine a young man—an American—not caring about his country being at war! As a member of a draft board, I should have followed him. They say the German Secret Service has agents everywhere—"

"German nothin'!" scoffed the passenger appealed to. "Didn't you get the yellow look on his face? Just out of the 'big

stir.' I guess we got enough decent American boys to fight this war without callin' fer the jail-birds!"

CHAPTER II.

THE CALL.

THROUGH the crowd on the station platform the tall man in the shoddy clothes pushed his way, jostling the slow-moving, returning a scowl for an apology, and made his way to the street.

On the sidewalk he paused, and looked around. Not much change here after five years! Gregg's saloon on the corner was still doing a roaring business. A few more autos perhaps, parked in front of the Kayo Theater—and flags—but then there were always plenty of flags on the street. Harlem shopkeepers were always having celebrations of one kind or another.

He turned westward reveling in the unaccustomed feeling of mingling, unnoticed and unwatched, in a freely moving crowd. It was hard to realize that he was as free as they were, that he could walk and keep walking in any direction he chose, stop when he liked, go when he felt inclined to, with no guard to head him off, with no menacing snarl to jerk the check-rein, and direct his lagging footsteps to a numbered kennel in a numbered tier.

As he walked on, gradually he sensed a difference in the atmosphere of the street. It was not only the profusion of flags, large and small, draped and festooned, that fluttered from windows and store-fronts far and near, in a dazzle of colors and patterns of half a dozen nations. It was not only the lack of the usual groups of loungers on the street corners.

It was reflected more in the faces of the passers-by, an intentness, a seriousness of expression quite different from the bored, dragged-out countenances that he remembered as characteristic of street crowds.

And there was something else reflected in those faces in stores, and streets, and passing trolleys—even one as soured and scornful as the man in the ill-fitting prison hand-me-downs could see it—a sort of elation, as if into the drab lives of clerks and

salesmen, butchers and bakers and bored millionaires there had come a glimpse of adventure, a flash of romance.

On a street corner, once devoted to the soap-box orators of politics or sociology, a recruiting meeting was being held. A sweating sergeant in khaki held forth from a rostrum draped in the flags of the Allies. Grouped beneath him were several others in uniform, and a girl in white with the symbol of the Red Cross blazing from her snowy headdress.

The speaker finished in a burst of hand-clapping, and a couple of young men stepped up to the rostrum.

The soldier looked over the crowd again, and caught sight of the tall man.

"There we are!" he called, pointing. "That's the size we're looking for! Come ahead, buddy! You'll be a top-sergeant in a week! Uncle Sam needs a guy like you for the infantry. Don't let him get away, nurse!"

But the man from "up the river," was pushing his way out through the spectators.

Sanderson—that was the man he was looking for, the one man who could, and would clear his name in the eyes of the world.

He walked quickly through the jostling crowd, with hands clenched as if they already had Edmund Sanderson's lying throat in their strong grip. A newsboy, laboring under an armful of papers, shoved a startling headline across the path of the man in the gray cap:

BRITISH SMASH TEUTON LINE ON FIFTEEN MILE FRONT!

STORM HOOG! FIGHT THEIR WAY THROUGH IN TERRIFIC BATTLE!

He pushed the paper aside roughly, crossed the street, and found a vacant telephone booth in a cigar store.

"Caraway 6796," he snapped. A thin, precise voice answered him.

"Hello! Yes, this is Mr. Sanderson's residence. No, this is the butler. Who is speaking please?"

"This is an old friend of Mr. Sanderson's. Can you tell me when he is expected in?"

"Sorry, sir. Mr. Sanderson's regiment left this morning for camp—Spartanburg, South Carolina. Mrs. Sanderson will be in shortly. She is attending her Women's Auxiliary meeting—"

Slamming down the receiver, the man in the gray cap walked slowly out to the curb, shoved his hands deep into his pockets, and grinned sourly.

He might have known Sanderson would get away from him somehow, even if the rat had to go to war to do it. It wasn't necessary to ask the butler what regiment he meant; it was the Sixty-Seventh, of course.

The man in the gray cap had introduced Sanderson into the regiment himself—back in the days when war was unthought-of, and a membership in the fashionable Sixty-Seventh was a thing to be prized and handed down from father to son, as had happened in his own case.

That was a long time ago. He had never written to his former National Guard comrades. He hoped they had forgotten him. Naturally, they wouldn't like to remember that one of the old outfit was doing time in Sing Sing for manslaughter, especially one who had been easily the most popular man in the regiment.

One or two of the boys had written a sympathetic few lines which were never answered. His pride had intervened.

Now Sanderson, successful, rich, feted, was marching away to war, and the man he had sent to prison—well, he would wait for him.

Sourly he watched the passers-by stream along intent on their own particular affairs, lucky people with homes to go to, wives to greet them at the door, means of livelihood ready at hand.

Above the noise of traffic sounded a steady, dull booming. It swelled into brazen song, and around the corner swung a military band, horns blaring stridently, bass-drums and cymbals crashing in time to the tread of a thousand pairs of khaki-clad legs.

He watched them tramp past in column of platoons, every chin out-thrust, every rifle barrel in line above the ranks of campaign hats. Handkerchiefs fluttered from

windows, handclapping and cheers heralded their advance along the flag-decked street. The cheers swelled to a steady roar, almost drowning the sound of the band in front.

The man in the gray cap found he was tapping his foot in time to the booming of the bass-drum, and stopped, frowning at himself. But it was an old regimental marching song he had tramped miles to once upon a time; so there was some excuse.

Rank after rank of brown young faces, eyes gazing straight ahead, swept by him. The crowd, good-natured but enthusiastic, almost pushed him from the curb. He found himself almost touching the passing men.

Above the forest of rifle-barrels, whipping and curling about the heads of the color-guard, the regimental colors and the Stars and Stripes rode side by side high in the air.

They swept closer, came opposite the man in the gray cap, passed by in a riot of cheering, and he found himself standing, gazing after the swaying standards, with his heels together, his shoulders squared, and the gray cap crumpled in his hand.

The crowd broke up, followed the rear of the column, leaving him almost alone; and he stood with his cap in his hand for almost a minute. Then he turned slowly, and retraced his steps toward the East Side.

For there were forces abroad in that July of 1917—unseen forces that urged men to do things they did without knowing why—forces that were reflected in the eyes of clerks and salesmen, butchers and bakers and bored millionaires, and—yes—even men with pale prison faces, tinged with the flush reflected from the red stripes of a passing flag, men old and young, good and bad, hearkening to the adventure that called to them from the thundering fields of France.

The recruiting party was still holding forth on the corner. The tall man, still holding the cap he had forgotten to return to his head, pushed through to the front.

"What outfit?" he inquired.

A sergeant, seated at a table covered with posters, and printed forms, looked up quickly, and motioned the other to a chair.

"Best in the army," he volunteered readily. "Eighty-Eighth New York National Guard! Last call for supper! Hop in before the draft gets you. What name, buddy?"

The tall man hesitated. The sergeant poised his pen over the inkwell, and grinned.

"Think up a good one," he suggested. "I don't care what it is."

"Stewart Hull—and it's the right one. No address and no occupation! Any objections to that?" the tall man concluded defiantly.

"Hell, no! We're lookin' for men, not pedigrees, now!"

CHAPTER III.

THE BRAND OF THE "DOUBLE-EIGHT."

THE Eighty-Eighth, known affectionately by the regimental rank and file as the "Double Eight," was neither as ancient nor as swagger as the fashionable Sixty-Seventh. Memberships were not handed down from father to son like family heirlooms.

As a matter of fact, the fathers of most of the members started life in Ireland, Italy, Germany, or Russia, and had flowed into the land of the free through the narrow immigration channel of old Castle Garden.

It was not an old regiment as traditions go, having been organized as recently as the Civil War; but the brass tablet inside the armory doors, listed with the names of the battles fought by the Double Eights was a significant testimonial.

Stewart Hull, fresh from the hands of the examining doctor, paused in front of the tablet, with his arms full of uniform and equipment, shoes, overcoat, leggings, and hat.

"Some battin' average, eh, big boy?" the sergeant chuckled. "Read 'em an' weep! Bull Run—Antietam—Gettysburg—Appomattox—"

"Antietam," Hull nodded. "My grandfather was there—with another Union regiment though."

"Sure," the sergeant agreed generously. "There was other outfits there, too. Which one was he with?"

"The Sixty-Seventh New York."

"With the swell guys, eh? He must have had dough. But that's a good crowd, too—only too rich for my blood. They left for the South to-day. We'll probably meet up with them down there before we go across. Come on, an' I'll let you meet your buddies in the squad-room. You'll be in C Company—Captain Donovan's. Better meet him first."

He led the way up the broad stairs, worn with generations of marching feet, past glass cases holding stained flags and yellowed muster-rolls, and knocked at a heavy, oaken door halfway down a long passage.

"Come!" a brisk voice commanded.

"Leave your stuff on the floor here till afterward," the sergeant suggested.

Captain Donovan proved to be a square-jawed man of fifty or so with the alert, athletic figure of twenty-one. He listened to the sergeant's report, but his keen, blue eyes, set deeply behind heavy brows, never left the face of the recruit. Instinctively, Hull's heels came together, and his hands straightened at his sides.

"All right, sergeant," the captain directed. "You can leave the papers here. I'll have Hull take them around later."

Stewart waited for several minutes after the sergeant left while Captain Donovan glanced through the report of the physical examination, and the enlistment form. Finally, he leaned back in his chair.

"I always like to get acquainted with each man personally," he explained. "It makes things easier all around. By the way, you may stand at ease. You have had some military training, I see. Have you served in the National Guard before?"

Under the searching glance of the older man Stewart reddened. Somehow, the ready evasion would not come out.

"I served with the Sixty-Seventh for a couple of years," he admitted.

Captain Donovan tapped the enlistment paper with his fingers. "It doesn't say so here. Did you forget to mention it?"

"No. I purposely left it out. I didn't want questions asked. I'm not a good liar—I—I was released this morning from the penitentiary!"

The captain whistled softly, and frowned at the floor. "I don't want to cross-examine you. But I think a further explanation is in order before we go through with this. What was the trouble?"

"Manslaughter—first degree. I was convicted of driving a car while intoxicated, and killing two people. They made an example of me. That's all."

"No, it isn't all, Hull. There's more to it than that. I've spent twenty years in this outfit, and have known a lot of men. I think I know something of human nature.

"You're not a criminal. You're the type of man I want behind me when the time comes to go over the top. You got out of jail this morning, and joined up with the colors right away; when you had a chance to lie out of your past record, you came clean with it—two things in your favor right at the start!"

He pointed to a chair beside the flat-topped desk at which he sat.

"Now you just squat down there, and let me have the insides of this. There are two sides to every story, and I want to hear yours. I have a right to hear it anyway, even if I wasn't old enough to be your old man. Some day, if I have the luck to get by the medico, you and I and the rest of these boys are going to be knocking around in some tight places together. Get it off your mind now!"

Later, in training and in battle, Stewart was to learn to know and love this straight-thinking, straight-hitting ex-lumberjack and business man turned citizen-soldier.

Stewart was to find that there was plenty for "Celluloid" Jim Donovan to learn about the higher strategy of modern warfare—everything that had transpired since the Spanish-American War was lost to Celluloid Jim, or at best vaguely grasped—but Stewart was also to learn, as he began to learn there and then, that when it came to square-dealing and downright decency between men, Jim Donovan could give most people cards and spades.

Jerkily, with an occasional tactfully worded question from the older man, the story came out. Dimly surprised at his own loquacity, unaware of the compelling

force of the other's sympathetic understanding, Stewart found himself going into details of that fateful night, breaking the embittered silence of five years, uncovering the secret hope he had clung to all throughout, that he would some day be able to clear himself.

"Not that it makes much difference to any one else," he ended grimly. "I have no relatives to worry about me—fortunately. An uncle, one of my father's brothers, living up in Albany, used to look out for me occasionally—got me my job in fact—but he dropped me like a hot iron when this happened."

"So did the girl," Donovan added, "but she didn't amount to much. She wouldn't have quit you otherwise. Some day you'll run across a real woman—there ain't too many of them—and you'll see the difference when it comes to sticking to a man. This other fellow that lied his way out, got her, and I'd say he was welcome!"

Stewart leaned forward in his chair.

"So you—believe I'm right?" he questioned. "You think I'm good enough for the outfit?"

Celluloid Jim's heavy fist cracked on the desk-top.

"Damned tooting I do!" he shouted. "I don't know what the law says about it. You may not be a citizen any more for all I know, and what's more I don't give a fiddler's fol-de-rol either way! I think you've had a raw deal all around, and if you're willing to fight for the country that kept you in jail, it ought to be darned glad to have you!"

He handed the enlistment papers to Stewart, and shoved out his hand.

"There you are! You're with us now, and good luck to you! You've got the brand of the Double Eight on you now, and I know you won't disgrace it. Tell Sergeant Breitman everything's O K, and you're to go into Corporal Jennings's squad.

"And by the way," he added, as Stewart started for the door, "don't worry a bit about telling me your troubles. I've been keeping other people's secrets all my life."

Stewart located Sergeant Breitman in the

rifle-range in the basement. His good-humored face broke into a grin.

"I got tired waiting," he explained. "Whenever Celluloid Jim starts in giving advice to a rookie it usually takes all day."

"Where did he get that nickname?" Stewart inquired.

"Oh, that was way back in Cuba—he was in the Rough Riders. He always wore a celluloid collar and cuffs on active duty. Wore them on the Mexican border, too, when every one else, even the major-general, looked like a longshoreman after working a double shift. He's a clean old guy.

"Clean inside and out," he added loyally. "They don't come any better than him. Let's go find your squad. We're spread all over the armory these days."

CHAPTER IV.

THE SCHOOL OF THE SOLDIER.

CORPORAL JENNINGS'S squad occupied a corner of a balcony overlooking the vast armory floor. The acres of floor-space, the balcony and company rooms, and every nook and cranny of the block-square building were crowded with army cots, shelter-halves, blankets, haversacks, ponchos, packs and all the equipment of the soldier in the field, were piled under and around the cots, leaving little room in the aisles for the swarm of men in uniform, who seemed constantly on the move.

Jennings, a husky youth, with a heavy jaw, but a reassuring grin, showed Stewart where to dump this armful of blankets and equipment, and promised to help him locate a cot in the morning.

"Kind of crowded here now, that's a fact," he said. "We're a little overmanned, but I guess the colonel ain't taking no chances of not having a full quota when we're sworn into Federal service—and that won't be long now. Our company was lucky to get the balcony. Some of those birds has to hit the hay in the ambulances and escort-wagons outside."

"Looks pretty well jammed," Stewart agreed.

"Yeah. It's different at inspection time,

but this is in between. We drill in Central Park these days. We only use the armory to sleep in, while we're holdin' ourselves in readiness. Can't come too soon for me. I'd like to see what all the shootin's for over across the pond. Got any friends in the outfit here?"

"No—I'm a stranger to everybody, I guess."

"Makes you feel kinda lonesome. I know how it is at first. Don't you worry. You got plenty of friends—a thousand of them in the Double Eights right now. If you need any help gettin' settled and acquainted, just give me a shout."

Stewart found no necessity to do any shouting though. There is a knack in getting along with people that some men naturally possess, and others never seem to acquire—an ability to keep the mouth shut, and the mind open, to be ready to lend the other fellow a hand, to take the petty hardships and discomforts of a crowded mass of men without whining for the comforts of home—these things spell popularity among soldiers everywhere. The army is no place for a misanthrope.

Within the next week or so Stewart found there were all sorts and conditions of men in C Company of the Double Eights, from tall, moody Sarsfield, late professor of history, to short, stocky, and red-haired Finnaneran, late steam-fitter; and the variety included Georgeopoulos, the Greek banana merchant, who spoke broken English, Garrison, the Broadway actor, who spoke perfect English. And Marisino, from sunny Italy, who spoke no English at all.

Rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief, Yankee, Irish, Swede, and Wop, day by day they flowed into the melting pot of the Double Eights, to be cast in the mold, and tempered in the flame, and hammered into the image of the finest soldier of all time, the American doughboy.

Theirs was the heritage of the fighting races of the world, Latin, and Teuton, and Gaul. There were stocky, black-eyed descendants of the Romans that manned the legions of Caesar; there were hawk-nosed, lean great-grandsons of the men who sighted along the squirrel-rifles at Bunker Hill.

There were red-haired, blue-eyed men

whose Celtic ancestors stormed the British lines at forgotten Fontenoy. There were men whose forefathers had drawn a longbow at Hastings, and held the squares at Waterloo. There were men of every blood and clime, as there had been men of every race and breed that followed the cross, in the far-off Crusading days, to the plains of Palestine.

They sweated through their drills in the open spaces of Central Park, fired their rifles at the targets in the basement of the armory, stumbled through their "school of the soldier" in the stifling disorder of the armory floor, practiced their manual of arms until rifles became heavy as lead, and between times chanted their doggerel battle-song:

"The Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming,
The drums are drumming
Over there!"

What they lacked in voice-culture they made up for in sincerity and volume. They were as yet a raw product, unrefined by the fires of war, and might have deserved the appellation of "armed mob" once so glibly voiced by a great German general in reference to the armies of the American Civil War. It was an armed mob that was later to break the Hindenburg Line.

Stewart joined the "awkward squad" alongside Marisino *et al*, but after an hour's drill was pulled out of it by Jennings.

"No use wasting time with you on rookie drill," he said. "You seem to know your book."

"I had a little training before," Stewart admitted. "Some years ago."

"Thought so. You've got the set-up of a soldier anyway, and that's half the game." He appraised the broad shoulders, and narrow waist. "Ever do any boxing?"

"Just played around with the gloves once in awhile at college. I'm no Jack Johnson by a long shot."

"Well, you might try your hand later on if you like at the regimental bouts. Better trot along now and draw a rifle. You'll be drillin' with the rest of the company after this in the park afternoons."

"I'll like that better, - guess," Stewart surmised.

Jennings grinned.

"Don't kid yourself. Old Celluloid Jim has ideas of his own on close-order. He'll run you ragged like he does the rest of us."

During the first couple of times on Central Park's broad acres, Stewart felt as ragged as Jennings predicted. Celluloid Jim Donovan was a builder of soldiers, and the first rule in his book was to build up a physique suitable to the demands of an active campaign. There was no place for weaklings in his company.

Tireless himself, he exacted the utmost from his pupils, and if he was a father to his men off duty, he was also a strict drill-master in working hours.

"In the last analysis," he maintained, "battles are decided by the infantryman with rifle and bayonet, and they always have been since the time of the Roman foot soldier with his sword and spear. Artillery and cavalry, and all the rest, only help out. It's up to the man on foot, individually; and the infantryman depends on his physique to carry him through without cracking."

"Hell!" grumbled Finneran, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "We ain't no blamed Romans—except maybe Marschino, or whatever his name is—an' if that guy's a gladiator I'll eat his whole banana stand. Celluloid Jim's a right guy, but he's got the wrong dope on this business. We're trainin' to shoot the Dutchmen, not play football wid them."

But they kept right at it, Captain Jim on their heels all the time—skirmish order, deploying at double time, assembling on the run, back and forth across the open meadows, with the sun getting warmer day by day.

After a week at this, Stewart began to feel the improvement and look the better for the advantage of the present mode of life over the years of confinement. His skin lost the unhealthy pallor and began to take on the tan coat appropriate to his size and weight.

At twenty-five one still has room for growth in red blood and muscle. Fresh air and exercise, healthful food, and a healthy

outlook on life, congenial surroundings, and the respect of a world that idolized the man in uniform—these things were working their subtle magic, transforming him into a different being from the sullen, soured ex-convict who had stepped aboard the local at Ossining.

Toward the end of the second week, during one of the rest periods in the park, Captain Donovan called him aside.

"I had a talk with Jennings this morning," the captain said. "I'm pushing him up a step. He'll be a sergeant. That leaves a vacancy for a corporal, and practically all his squad are new men. Jennings mentioned your name for the place when I asked him to suggest some one."

"To tell you the truth, I'd been thinking of the same thing. I think you have a good way with the men in the squad, and you seem to be catching on faster than the rest. Do you want to take over as acting corporal?"

Stewart's look of surprise and pleasure was sufficient answer, even if he did experience difficulty finding his voice immediately.

"All right," Captain Jim smiled. "We'll see how you make out at it. Don't thank me now. I'm loading more work on your shoulders, for one thing. But I guess you'll get your corporal's stripes all right."

The rest of the drill period Stewart walked on thin air. Later he and several others were detailed to wait behind to load a truck with the equipment used during the day in practice shelter-tent pitching, while the rest marched off to the armory.

Stewart, by himself in a corner of the meadow, leaned back against a pile of shelter-halves, and gave himself over to the cool of the evening, the enjoyment of a briar pipe, and the pleasant thought of a corporal's stripes.

The first two, after a hard day's work, usually constitute a recipe for day-dreaming, and Stewart had not reached the cynical age when a day-dream is a thing to be scorned. The groups of spectators who had gathered to watch the maneuvers of the Double Eights drifted toward home.

Corporal Hull! It had a pleasant sound—pleasanter by far than Convict Hull. Some

day that whole mess would be straightened out, after the war, perhaps, when Corporal Hull—Sergeant Hull, maybe—got back from the war a returning hero reinstated in the respect of the world, formally declared innocent, the record of his service with the flag to back him up, decorated, perhaps—who knows? So many things happen in war; the chance might come to distinguish himself—a medal, a place in the community, honored by friends, and—

"Mr. Soldier!"

CHAPTER V.

MARTHA LANE.

STEWART snapped out of his castle in Spain with a jerk, and scrambled to his feet, grabbed his pipe from his mouth, and almost fumbled it, spilling the ashes over his blouse.

The cause of his confusion gazed up at him from a slim height of five feet two with a devastating calmness in her shadowed gray eyes and an appreciative smile lurking somewhere in the curves of her lips. It is not unpleasant to denude eighteen to watch tall young men fumble around when she speaks to them.

Nor is it unpleasant, though a trifle disconcerting, for a young man to snap out of a castle in Spain and bump right into the prettiest girl he had ever seen outside a magazine cover.

"You spoke to me?" Stewart asked, recovering his pipe and wits at one grab.

"Yes. I had no idea soldiers were so easily startled. I was about to ask you what those things were all wrapped up—bombs?"

"Er—no. Not exactly," Stewart explained, careful not to offend this goddess in orchid georgette by smiling. "They're tents—rolled up. Bombs are—er—more explosive; metal, you know."

"You must think me stupid," she confessed; "and I know I shouldn't have disturbed you with such a foolish question. You must be tired after your drilling."

Stewart shook his head. "Not at all. I'll be glad to show you how the contraption works."

Which, considering Celluloid Jim's ten-hour training day, showed the recuperative effect of that particular girl on Stewart Hull.

He set the pup-tent up on its collapsible poles, explained in Captain Jim's best manner just how the halves were carried on the march, and crawled inside to show how roomy it was.

"I don't think it's very comfortable," she decided judicially, "if it leaves your feet out that way in the rain. I thought they were bigger than that. I have a cousin in the army, and he sent me a picture of his tent one time when he was camping, and it was more comfortable than that."

"The officers have bigger tents," Stewart grinned; "but they don't have to carry them. I'm only a buck private. Probably your cousin outranks me."

"He's a lieutenant—I don't know whether a buck lieutenant or just a plain one; but I don't see what difference that makes. Some of the—the nicest boys I know are just plain soldiers."

Stewart laughed, and bowed with exaggerated formality.

"In the name of all the plain soldiers I accept the—"

"I mean it!" she flashed back. "They shouldn't make distinctions. Everybody's trying to help. I wish I could do something besides look pretty and powder my nose."

"You do both," Stewart assured her, "very successfully." He felt he had put the thing awkwardly, and was relieved to see she disregarded the remark as irrelevant.

"I suppose I am the first of the family to be a non-combatant. I had a grandfather at Bull Run."

"So did I!"

"Really?" She rewarded him with a dazzling sparkle of white teeth and gray eyes that left Stewart's mind a hopeless blank. "That gives us something in common. I don't feel so guilty now about talking to a total stranger. My cousin's wife—I'm stopping with her here—warned me not to let my breezy Western ways lead me astray in the great city. Back home,

in Oklahoma, we have different ideas. We trust people—especially our own soldiers."

"I think you're right, in Oklahoma," Stewart assured her. "My name is Hull, and—"

He reddened, and tried to find the proper words.

"If—any time you and your cousin—feel like—would want to—er—look over the armory, I'd be glad to show you around during visiting hours. That is, if you are interested in seeing how we plain soldiers live."

"I'd love to!" she exclaimed delightedly. "I think it would be fun. I'll make Harriet take me. I only hope she doesn't start to my cousin's camp too soon. She spoke of going there." She held out her hand. "I'm afraid she is looking for me now. Good-by, Mr. Soldier Hull, and thank you for the demonstration."

He grasped her hand gingerly, half afraid to crush its fragility in his strong grip. It had been a long time since Stewart Hull had felt the softness of a girl's hand in his. It might have been that, or it might have been an unreasonable fear that she would vanish into thin air, that made him reluctant to release that small hand.

It might have been the memory of the two grandfathers of Bull Run that induced her to prolong a parting handclasp longer than was strictly necessary. But Bull Run, fought and finished fifty-odd years, had no connection with the deepening red of her cheeks as she drew away.

"I—I'm sure she is looking for me," she said quickly.

"But you haven't told me your name," he insisted. "If I'm to expect you to visit us, with your—"

"Martha!" a strident feminine voice sounded from behind a fringe of trees.

"That's it—Martha Lane. I'm being paged through the park."

A woman, young, fashionably dressed from the tips of her white kid shoes to the marcel wave of her blond hair, appeared through the trees and picked her way carefully across the littered meadow.

"Martha," she complained, ignoring the man in uniform completely, "I've been searching for you all over. You mustn't

run away by yourself this way. Remember, dear, this isn't Oklahoma—"

"But, Harriet, this gentleman was showing me how our boys do their tents."

The "gentleman" in question was not accorded a glance. But the cold profile was sufficient. Stewart Hull's face set in grim lines.

"He will be very glad to get back to his work, I'm sure," she continued. "Later, when we get to camp, one of the officers will show you around, and explain more satisfactorily, I imagine—"

"Edmund Sanderson was always clever at explanations!"

She turned toward him then, and the too perfect complexion flushed and whitened underneath.

"Stewart—Hull!" She stepped back a pace.

"Precisely—and not a bit dangerous, Harriet, in spite of the past five years. There is really no need to be alarmed. I think, without wishing to be rude, we are both well satisfied with the way things turned out."

She caught the glance directed at the platinum band on her finger. Her eyes narrowed disdainfully.

"You couldn't expect me to wait for a jailbird to come out."

"I couldn't," he said evenly. "I couldn't expect you to have faith in any one. Believe me, I'm glad now that you didn't. But my quarrel is with Edmund Sanderson, the man who lied his way clear. He is only partly punished by having you."

"How dare you?" Her mouth was a thin, menacing, red line. "Come, Martha! Unless you would prefer to have our friend here explain some other matters to you—probably the tricks of the criminal."

Martha hesitated, trouble darkening the gray eyes.

Stewart did not look up, but bowed and walked away.

Across the meadow Sergeant Breitman waved at him to hurry.

"Make it snappy with the equipment, Hull," he ordered, when Stewart ran up. "They're waiting at the armory to check it up."

"What's the rush?" asked Stewart.

"Didn't you hear about it? You must have been asleep for the afternoon. We're to be sworn into Federal service to-night, and we start for Spartanburg next week. Boy! We're on our way!"

CHAPTER VI.

LIEUTENANT SANDERSON.

"WAR," said Sarsfield, late professor of history, "is a natural outlet provided by Dame Nature to relieve the blood pressure of civilization. One finds throughout the hectic careers of the nations of antiquity—"

"Boy! You tell 'em. You got the words." Finneran dug his spade into the heavy red mud of Spartanburg, and straightened up to wipe the perspiration from his red and freckled face. "Only keep your mind off them dames of yours, an' watch that pick. I blamed near lost my foot that time. Say, corp, what's the latest latrine rumor?"

Stewart, further up the narrow practice trench, grinned, and tossed a clinging spadeful of earth over the parapet.

"Three of them this morning. One was that the Kaiser had abdicated after committing suicide by jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge—"

"Now, I'll tell one," grunted Harrison.

"—The second rumor had it that the Twenty-Seventh Division sails day after to-morrow from New York, and we're going to be left behind to dig trenches and box and crate them, and send them over for use next winter when the ground is frozen in France. They're to ship us shell holes, and we're to cut them up—"

"I been cuttin' didoes wid this shovel for six months," complained Finneran, "an' I want action. This isn't my graft. I'm a steam-fitter. Most any two-dollar-a-day slob can push one of these banjoies."

"Cheer up," Harrison suggested. "You will get some variety when we get to stabbing the straw dummies at bayonet practice. They'll start us at that soon. By the way, I hear we're to be brought up to war strength of two hundred and fifty. That looks like going over soon."

"What outfit is sending the draft?" inquired Stewart.

"The One Hundred and Sixty-Eighth—used to be the old New York Sixty-Seventh. They're sending us half a dozen men to this company, and maybe an officer or two to fill out. Here comes the professor."

A French officer, one of the training staff, resplendent in horizon blue and silver, walked along the parapet, shrugged his shoulders, stroked his short black beard, and otherwise expressed approval of the work.

"Magnifique! Ver-ry good! Always, my friends, remember the soldier he work wiz shovel more zan rifle. Always he is ze architect. Sometimes he fight. Sometimes he is ze engineer."

"Sometimes he's a bum, if you ask me," Finneran said disgustedly.

"Later, yes," the Frenchman agreed politely. "He throws out ze bum. Later you will learn how to throw ze bum—ze English bum first—"

"Suits me first rate," Finneran agreed heartily. "I never did like the English. I been thrown outa better places—"

"Quit kidding him, Finneran," counseled Stewart. "He's talking of bombs. If Celluloid Jim hears you joshing our allies he'll hand you K. P. for a week. There is 'Recall' sounding. Let's go."

The trench was empty, and the men of Company C had struggled into their O.D. shirts and blouses before the last notes of the bugle had died away. They fell in line, slung the picks and shovels on their shoulders, and marched off in column of squads toward the tents of Camp Wadsworth.

They moved snappily, in the best of spirits, for it was Saturday—the day for a quick clean-up and shine, and a quicker run into Spartanburg for the movies, or the cuisine of the Columbia Hotel, or the delights of Mrs. Hughs's fried chicken and candied yams, or perhaps an evening around the hospitable firesides of the warm-hearted Southern folk.

It was a different body of men now than it had been in the recruit days in the armory of the Double Eights. The months of field training, the days spent on the open

rifle range, the weary miles of marching under packs, the hours spent in drilling, learning the difficult art of soldiering in the lecture hall and on the drill ground—these things were setting the stamp of the soldier on the men of the Double Eights; no longer the Double Eights now, but the One Hundred and Eighty-Eighth Infantry of the army of Uncle Sam.

Individually, the men had profited by the life under campaign conditions. Self reliance, assurance, confidence in themselves and in their leaders, had been bred into them, and the comradeship and brotherhood of fighting men gathered in a common cause.

War is a stern task-master, and punishes the weak pitilessly, but the lessons it teaches sink deeply. Only death can dissolve that bond of brotherhood.

None had profited more by the experience than Stewart Hull. Mentally and physically he had responded to the tonic of outdoor life, the cool nights with nothing but thin canvas hiding the stars, the days of effort under the hot South Carolina sun. His mind was clear of the past. He was more confident of the future, and of his ability to meet it on even terms.

He stepped along briskly, adding his voice to the chorus that floated back from the winding column:

"The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be.
Ain't what she used to be,
Ain't what she used to be.
The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be
Many years ago."

He sang loudly, clearly, but with no particular musical ability. Finneran, with his sweet tenor, and Georgeopoulos, the Greek, with his quavering bass were the real entertainers of the company.

Usually, it was some tuneful ditty that enlightened the long marches, "The Last Long Mile," for instance, with Sergeant Jennings and Marisini shouting one another on the last chord, or "Every Day We Sign the Pay-roll, But We Never Get a Damn, Red Cent," sung to the majestic rhythm of "John Brown's Body."

Sarsfield, the dreamer, could close his

eyes to the khaki, and picture, in spite of the misfitting words, these lean, weather-tanned men, as Cromwell's Ironsides chanting their battle hymn on the field of Worcester.

The long lines of wall-tents came in sight, and as they passed the opening of their company street, Company C turned out of line, and formed up in the open space to be dismissed.

"Going to town?" Jennings inquired of Stewart, as they made for their tent.

"Yes. Probably look in at a movie, and try one of the chicken dinners at 'The Greasy Spoon,' or the hotel."

"Lay off the hotel, unless you want to get arm-paralysis saluting some of the brand-new 'shave tails.' They're as thick around there as fleas—and about as troublesome. You're a lucky guy, though. I'm on guard to-night."

Stewart hurried through his preparations, which consisted of a quick shave, and a change of shoes and leggings. Trench-digging had excused Company C from the usual Saturday morning inspection with its clean shaves, and shiny turn-out.

"You'll knock her dead," Jennings called after him. "Ask her has she got a friend."

Stewart laughed, and made a running jump for the flivver, already crowded with soldiery for the four bumping miles to town. He had no girl in mind in going to town—or if he did, it was some one altogether outside of Jennings's ken, some one unattainable, that had flashed into Stewart's life one spring evening in Central Park, and had vanished again.

He clung to the running-board of the swaying Ford, and frowned at the memory of that meeting with Harriet Sanderson. He recalled to mind for the hundredth time the troubled look in the eyes of Martha Lane as he turned away without a denial of the damning indictment.

Explanations would have called for proof, and the proofs were lacking. There was no reason to suppose that she would have cared for explanations. He was a stranger to her, a chance acquaintance, and any little favorable impression he might have made would have been swept away by the mere announcement of his prison record.

Just because he had thought of her night after night, after "Taps" had blown and the day's work was over, that didn't mean she also had remembered him.

There was a possibility of her coming to Spartanburg. She had said something about it. That was really the key to his visits to town. Some time he hoped to meet Martha Lane again.

What he would say to this cousin of the man who had wronged him, what impression she must have received of him from the mouth of her cousin, Stewart had no idea. But stronger than his hatred of Edmund Sanderson, stronger than his fear of her contempt, was his desire to see her again.

He dropped off the flivver at a corner, paid his share of the fare, and strolled toward the main hotel of the town. Inside the crowded lobby he paused in front of the newsstand, selected a magazine, and made for the mezzanine floor.

There he could read and, as was his custom Saturday afternoons, watch the busy scene beneath him. It was the largest place in Spartanburg where the local social world of the camp, masculine and feminine, passed in review.

As he seated himself near the rail, an officer seated farther back, stopped chatting with a girl to glare at the soldier's broad back.

"Sit somewhere else, corporal," he snapped harshly. "I can't see through you, you know!"

Stewart swung about in the wicker chair, and found himself face to face with Edmund Sanderson.

CHAPTER VII.

JENNINGS HAS THE WORD.

IT was the same Sanderson. Five years had made little change in his round, fat face, effeminately pink and white, except to push the curly hair farther back, and add baggy folds of dissipation underneath the shifty, whitish-blue eyes. They widened now with fear, and a kind of cornered desperation as Stewart stood up, menacingly calm.

Sanderson looked around quickly. The

mezzanine was almost deserted. He shoved his chair back, scrambling to his feet.

"Here, now, Hull!" he blustered. "Keep away from me! Remember I'm an officer. If you lay a hand on me—"

"As yellow as ever," Stewart nodded. "Even that uniform you're a disgrace to, can't make a rat into a bulldog. Don't worry. I'm not going to touch you, and give you a chance to send me away again. Sit down!"

Sanderson slouched back into his seat. For the first time, Stewart turned to the girl and recognized, with a sudden quickening of pulse-beats, Martha Lane.

If he had had the experience of Edmund Sanderson with womankind, Stewart would have interpreted the look she gave him correctly, and been flattered accordingly. An expert in those matters would have concluded that there had been a good many times during the last six months when the memory of a certain meeting in Central Park—but Stewart did not belong among the glib analysts of the hotel lounges.

"I'm sorry you heard that," he mumbled awkwardly. "But as long as you did, I'm going to thrash it out here. This man has got to do some explaining. I know he's related to you, and that finishes me in your estimation."

"Not at all," she rejoined with spirit. "Cousin Edmund and I disagree on a good many things. He's only distantly related to me anyway, and since he is no longer my host—"

"Now, Martha," Sanderson broke in, "there's no need to go into that."

"I've heard the other side of the story from Harriet and you," she explained, her eyes flashing. "He has just accused you of sending him away, and you want to avoid discussing it."

Sanderson's lip curled maliciously. "Every criminal says he has been railroaded. It's an old story."

Stewart felt the muscles around his jaws harden. "You know better than that, Sanderson. You know who drove that car. Some day I'm going to choke the truth out of your lying carcass. I've been waiting five years for justice. I'll wait five years longer if necessary."

"Try it, Hull, and you'll go to Leavenworth for twenty years. We're in different positions now, remember. It's all right to talk this way when we're alone, but try it some time before witnesses if you want a quick court-martial. Maybe you'd like me to spread your record around the camp."

There was a hard note in Stewart's laugh. "You're too yellow for that, Sanderson. Even if you could force me out, which is doubtful, you realize too well what would happen to you when I became a civilian again. I could thrash you within an inch of your life, and you'd have no military court behind you either."

Sanderson stood up nervously. "Come on, Martha. We can finish our talk somewhere else."

"Our talk is finished," she answered coldly. "Let's not go into that matter again. Are you still for running away from Mr. Hull?"

"Mr. Hull!" he snapped viciously. "Wait until you see your Mr. Hull jumping around when I tell him to on the drill-ground. Keep in mind, too, your position here, living alone in a hotel, and entertaining enlisted men without a chaperone—bad enough if they were officers—"

Stewart stepped close to him, two capable fists clenched at his sides. To any one out of earshot, it appeared to be a proper position of attention assumed by a corporal addressing an officer. But Sanderson knew better.

He turned away on his heel, and made for the stairs leading to the lobby. Near the doorway he paused to send a parting shot.

"By the way, Corporal Hull, you might be interested to know that I am one of the detail transferred to Company C. Better watch your step."

"Nice boy, that cousin of yours," Stewart grinned, returning to the chair Sanderson had vacated. "I'm glad that disposition doesn't run in the family."

She placed her hand lightly on his arm.

"Do be careful of him," she counseled unsmilingly. "I know it's an awful thing to say of one's relatives, however distant; but he's not nice at all. I found out—so many things about him—living there with

them. He lies, and I know he's a coward, too."

"What things do you mean you found out about him?"

"I—don't—know—there were other not nice women—Harriet and he quarreled about them—"

"But that wasn't why you left there, was it?"

"No. Not altogether," she answered, looking away. "But I want to hear about your case. I mean that trouble five years ago. It was an automobile smash-up. You were supposed to have killed a bystander."

"Two of them," he said grimly. "I was crazy drunk, so they said. But I know I couldn't have driven that car in the state I was in. Pretty disgusting business to tell you about."

She leaned forward sympathetically.

"I never did care much for goody-goody men. You're not wild now anyway—and there weren't any—women mixed up in it."

He shook his head. "Not as far as I was concerned. Sanderson had some one there. If I had had some one with me besides Sanderson, it would have been different. But his testimony was conclusive. He had to save his own skin and he lied his way clear. Sometimes I think he arranged the whole thing that night."

"Oh! So that he could marry Harriet! She spat something out the other night, when they were quarreling, about his marrying her only for her money."

She rested her chin on her hand, and looked apparently with great interest at the throng in the lobby below.

"I understand," she said carelessly, "you were engaged to her at the time."

"I was tentatively engaged. Nothing had been announced. It was a kind of family arrangement. My aunt and uncle, who were living then, engineered it."

He did not add that Harriet herself, the spoiled child of wealth, had done some maneuvering to capture this poor but personable young man. But then he had never been sure of that. The whole thing transpired between two dances and as many drinks at the country club.

"We would never have hit it off together anyway," he remarked. "I always

had a feeling that way. I rather think that—somehow—love is like rolling the dice—I used to do that, too, to excess—you know instinctively when you are right."

She laughed softly. "I am afraid your metaphor is unromantic—and true in a way. I have never rolled dice—"

"Nor been in love," he broke in boldly.

The color deepened just the faintest shade in her cheeks, but the clear, gray eyes were untroubled as she turned to him:

"Not as I understand it in books, and on the stage. I like some people awfully well, or don't like them as soon as I meet them. At present, I don't like Cousin Edmund at all."

"I'm beginning to feel sorry for Cousin Edmund, if that's the case."

She sighed. "I've been fearfully bad-tempered with both of them. We quarreled again last week, and I left and came here for a few days before starting home—"

"Starting home!" Dismay showed plainly in Stewart's face.

"Of course, I must go some time—unless I manage to persuade my mother to let me stay here and find something useful to do in the Red Cross or something. She has been writing to me to come home. I'm all the family she has, you see."

"Was that the matter being discussed when I showed up?"

She shook her head. "Cousin Edmund was trying to persuade me to return. Not that he likes me at all, but I'm a kind of attraction, he thinks, around the house. I'm useful to serve tea to fat colonels, and play the piano for war-widowed majors."

"I see," Stewart frowned. "Friend Sanderson believes in getting on in the world. Kind of toadies to the higher-ups, and uses you as a come-on."

"He's insufferable. It wasn't that so much, but I despise lying, and I know he was lying to me about that—that—"

"My affair?" Stewart questioned. "You've been fighting my battles for me?"

Her cheeks flamed with color. She stood up, and looked at her wrist-watch in a sudden panic.

"It's late. I must go and write letters," she stammered, holding out her hand.

"Then that was the reason for your

leaving his house," Stewart insisted eagerly. She looked back from the curve of the stairs.

"Stupid! Of course it had nothing to do with it."

Stewart watched the hem of a skirt and two tiny suede shoes disappear up the stairway. Then he started back to camp.

"Hurry up, buddy!" called Sergeant Jennings from the guard tent at the entrance. "Make it snappy, or you'll be late for roll call."

"Boy," he addressed himself to the latest recruit, "take it from me, there's another good man gone wrong. I been in the army a long time, and when I see an otherwise sober guy comin' into barracks walkin' on the breeze, an' carrying his hat in one hand, and a lady's gauntlet in the other, an' trying to walk through the middle of a guard-tent, that spells only one thing—G-A-Double L, gal!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MARTHA DISAPPEARS.

THE next day was Sunday and, with no duties to bother him, Stewart hurried into town on a passing army truck, and dropped off at the Columbia Hotel.

"Miss Lane checked out this mawnin' early," the clerk behind the counter drawled, and continued sorting mail.

"Didn't she leave any forwarding address?" Stewart asked in dismay.

The clerk shook his head and frowned. He was a thin young man with spectacles and a receding chin, and he had different sets of manners for different ranks from a major-general down to a buck private. A corporal, for him, did not exist in a social sense.

Immediately, however, he discovered a flaw in this philosophy. The hand that this particular corporal extended across the counter was quite concrete, and the grip that was fastened on the clerk's shirt-front threatened to either drag the clerk across the counter, or separate him forcibly from a very necessary article of attire for the lobby of a fashionable hotel.

"Leggo!" he squirmed. "You-all are wrinklein' me up. I'll call the house detective."

"You'll lose it," Stewart promised, and gave the immaculate shirt another tug, "if you don't speak up now like a little man. Be nice, now! What time did Miss Lane check out, and where did she go?"

"Very early," mumbled the clerk, "and she took her baggage in a taxi. She ain't come back yet. It was about time for the eight thirty-three train for the North."

"That's better." Stewart released him. "Sorry to use the strong-arm stuff, but I just had to get the details. It pays to be polite."

"We're used to gentlemen in this hotel," the clerk sent after Stewart, "not hoodlums. You just try that again—"

Stewart was out of earshot on his way to the P. and N. Railroad station. But the sum total of the replies to his inquiries there amounted to nothing. No reservations had been made, but several passengers of both sexes, with and without baggage, young and old, had stepped aboard.

The colored porter, sweeping the platform, described, under the satisfying stimulus of a silver half dollar, half a dozen young ladies he had seen going aboard the train, and would have cheerfully described as many more for another half dollar.

"This was a particularly good looking lady," Stewart explained, striving for words to properly describe one beyond description, "about so high. Brown hair, neat and wavy, and big gray eyes, and walked kind of easy and dainty."

"Boss!" The glad prospect of further remuneration shone in the colored man's face. "Ah done seed that ve'y young lady. Yassuh! Walked just lak you sayed—kinda high-steppin' an' proud."

He pranced across the platform to demonstrate the cake-walking attitude.

"How was she dressed?" asked Stewart suspiciously.

"Dressed! Now you said somethin', boss. That lady was high-toned, an' Ah don't mean maybe! She had on a spangled dress, all silver shininglike wid tassels, an' green stockin's an' yaller shoes, an' her hair was frizzed all around fit to dazzle,

an' she sho was jes a-drippin' wid diamonds. Yassuh! Talked kinda high an' squeaky, too, lak a real lady. 'Looka heah, black man,' she says to me, 'brush dat dust outa mah way so mah feet—'"

"Go away from me, George," Stewart groaned, "before I commit mayhem on your person."

Gloomily he walked along the main street, and turned in at the Y. M. C. A.

In the locker room he stripped, stepped under a shower, and poised on the edge of the pool. Half a dozen men splashed around in the clear, greenish water.

"Oh, Hull!" Sergeant Breitman called from across the pool. "Just the man I wanted to see."

Stewart teetered on the springboard, made a shallow dive into the cold water, and came up, blowing and pink, beside Breitman.

"That's the stuff to liven you up," he said. "You didn't look so chipper just now. Had a bad night?"

"No. I don't touch the stuff."

"You don't look as if you did. You don't develop that build on white mule. I missed you yesterday. I wanted to talk to you about the regimental bouts coming off next month. Did you see the notice on the bulletin board?"

Stewart nodded without much interest. He was wondering just how far off Martha Lane was on her way north.

"Captain Jim thinks you ought to represent the company in the heavyweight division," Breitman went on. "He was watching you sparrin' around with Jennings here in the gym the other day, and he got the idea you might make the grade. None of the rest of us are box fighters."

"Nor me, either," Stewart scoffed. "I'm only a ham alongside a really good man. I can hit, and that's about all."

"Well, you won't run up against any Carpentiers in the other outfits as far as that goes. We ought to be represented for the credit of the company, and no one else shapes up as well as you do. Try it out."

"How about training?"

Breitman grinned. "If you want any more road work than Celluloid Jim hands us every day, buddy, you're a hog for pun-

ishment. After doing our stuff for these several months you're not exactly a human wreck. You can work out every day after drill with Jennings or some one of those other big bozos. The old man will be disappointed if we don't dig some one up."

"All right, if that's the case," Stewart agreed. "Don't blame me, though."

"Good! I'll put your name down."

"Get a ringside seat," Stewart advised, "and get ready to catch me in your lap when I come through the ropes. I'm going into it because I don't want to turn Celluloid Jim down, but something tells me I'll spend most of that evening falling through the air."

Breitman whistled.

"You sure are optimistic to-day! Some dame must 'a' give you the air bad!"

Stewart waved his hand and took a header into the pool that brought him neatly across and climbed out.

The rest of the day he spent in solitary misery, propped in a corner of the reading room, and walked the four miles back to camp for lack of something else to do.

It had grown suddenly chilly, and the Sibley stove, the curse of the soldier's existence, was going full blast in the tent, scattering sparks in all directions, alternately raising the temperature to oven heat, and lowering it close to freezing.

Stewart stepped into the midst of a discussion of the merits of the new additions to the company.

"We drew one loot, and ten men," Harrison announced. "I ran into the loot on the company street awhile ago, and I almost passed him without giving him the high sign, but he reminded me of it quick enough. I think he was out to collect salutes from the help, and send them home to the missus."

"Seems to think well of hisself," commented Finneran. "What's he look like in the rough?"

"Well," Harrison frowned thoughtfully, "as far as I can make out, he belongs to the species, little known to science, known as a whifflesnitcher."

"Whatsa da wifflesnitch?" Georgeopoulos asked respectfully of this man of travel and research.

"A whifflesnitcher," Harrison informed him, glancing through his rifle barrel for rust specks, "is a cross between a guinea hen with the feathers removed, and the rear end of a yellow taxicab. It makes its nest in the leather chairs of hotel lobbies, feeds on classified telephone books, and women's mesh bags, and has been known to attack blind peddlers when aroused.

"It makes a sound something like a custard pie being stepped on by a man in rubber boots, and not unlike the sound the wind makes in rushing through a full set of red flannels hanging out to dry."

"In my country," Georgeopoulos confided, climbing into his cot, "we no have."

"Hey!" a raucous voice sounded from up the company street. "You guys deaf? S'after 'Taps.' Douse them lights!"

Stewart undressed in the dark, sitting on the edge of the cot, and rolled up in the blankets wondering just how far away Martha Lane had got, and if the "whifflesnitcher" had anything to do with it.

CHAPTER IX.

SANDERSON BUTTS IN.

DURING the following month Stewart did not go into town. He found he had no further interest in the Columbia Hotel or its environs, and spent his week-ends about the camp, or dropped into Spartanburg only for a peep at the movies, and a meal at the restaurant jocularly known as the "Greasy Spoon."

For the rest of the time his days were fairly crowded.

Celluloid Jim was on the job all day, and every day. From seven thirty in the morning, when the company tumbled out sleepily in answer to "reveille" until eleven thirty, and from one o'clock in the afternoon until four, the men of Company C were kept busy.

Bayonet instruction along the practice trenches, "wig-wag" signaling, interior guard duty, "physical torture," as the grilling setting-up exercises were known, extended order drills, and divisional maneuvers were the order of the day, with an occasional bloodless battle fought between pla-

toons, in the brush, to teach the men the science of modern warfare.

Saturday morning meant the weekly inspection. Then everything was in order, cleaned, shining, smart. Kitchens, mess halls, shower baths, tents, even the latrines were spruced up, and the men of the different battalions lined up at attention to be passed on.

The inspection ended the soldier's week, and after that the ramshackle "jitneys" were crowded on their way to town with a joyful, noisy brood of the khaki-clad fledglings of Uncle Sam.

This period usually found Stewart, with Jennings or brawny Georgeopoulos as sparring partner, shuffling about with the padded gloves in a cleared space behind the squad tent.

Stewart had, as he knew, one of the most important items in the boxer's armory, a pile-driving right, and a left that was only slightly behind in hitting power. On the debit side, he was unpracticed in the craft of the ring, and the speed essential to a successful fighter.

Jennings outlined both sides of the ledger one day when he had recovered his wind after a hard workout. He felt a bruised shoulder, gingerly.

"Boy," he gasped, "you sure kept me movin' to keep away from that horseshoe in your right hand. You carry a sock if you knew how to use it. If that one had landed on the button instead of the shoulder I'd still be listenin' to the sparrows."

"I got me a couple of dollars an' a couple of shinners one summer workin' as a punching bag for Sailor Wells, so I know what I'm talkin' about. You got the wind, an' the weight, an' a mean punch."

Stewart grinned sidewise to avoid moving a puffed lip.

"You managed to get a bite at the banquet," he suggested. "Shook me up a little once or twice."

"Not a bit," Jennings shook his head decidedly. "You can take it, too, an' that's more than half the game. I know my stuff, an' I know I'm not in your class."

"But what you've got to learn is a lot, an' it'll take all our time to get you in shape for the preliminary elimination bouts."

You're wide open for one thing. I'm goin' to develop a guard, an' the best way to learn a guy how to cover up is to send 'em at him from all over. Now take the Greek for awhile, an' I'll watch you. You can't hurt him much. Where there's no sense there's no feelin'. Only don't bust your knuckles on that ivory dome."

Georgeopoulos pounded himself fiercely on the chest.

"No can hurt stronga man. In my country I lifta da cow on my back. Peoples say I have the strong of iron—"

"Most of the iron is under your hat, too. I bet," Jennings nodded. "Go to it. Maybe you'll live to lift the cow and throw the bull again."

Inclined to rough it, the Greek found his hands full, though Stewart, in response to Jennings's advisory remarks, contented himself with defensive tactics, occasionally snapping over a jab to the heavy jaw.

They were in the midst of a joyful mêlée when Lieutenant Sanderson appeared from the direction of headquarters.

"Gawd!" groaned Jennings. "Here's the whifflesnitcher himself."

Sanderson's eyes gleamed viciously as he caught sight of Stewart, perspiring and happy, weaving in and out and around the plunging Greek.

"Here." The officer's fat hand was shoved between the boxers. "What's this? Arrest these men, sergeant, for this disgraceful quarreling—"

He stepped back just in time to avoid a blind swing that Georgeopoulos, in the hurry of the moment, directed at a flabby cheek, that being the nearest thing to him.

Both boxers fell back. Sanderson pointed his finger at Stewart.

"I ought to have you arrested for creating a disturbance and attacking this man. No doubt you managed to pick a quarrel."

"Kind of attacked both of us, lieutenant," Stewart said evenly. "As a matter of fact, we're training for the bouts—"

"I don't believe you," Sanderson grated. "I've had my eye on you for several days. You're impudent and disrespectful. Stand at attention when you speak to an officer!"

Stewart's face paled. His eyes were dangerously bright as he brought his heels together.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



THE BAD PART OF A GOOD THING

HENS need tendin',
They look sad,
Fence needs mendin'
Awful bad.

Tools are rustin',
So's the Ford,
Cows are trustin'
In the Lord.

Folks are shirkin'
On the farm,
An' it's workin'
Lots of harm.

They care not a
Fig, you know,
Since they got a
Radio.

Pat Costello.

THE PARASITE

MEN say she is a parasite,
A lovely thing, but made to grow
In silky idleness, and throw
Her perfumed beauty to the air—
A pleasing toy, not meant to share
The trials of this world's grim fight.

A lovely but a useless thing
Is woman, born to wealth, they say—
Who takes, but never thinks to pay,
Nor "earn her salt," as others must,
Upon this planet's salty crust—
As useless as a white moth's wing.

And yet—for her great thousands toil
In midnight mines, so that her throat
May gleam with jewels. And that coat
Of rich, dark fur kept busy hands,
Ah, many hands, in many lands;
And for her whims a million moil

In factories, they're spinning silk
To clothe her beauty, make her fair:
In tropic climates men hunt rare,
Rich viands to intrigue her taste;
And in the gray, cold morning haste
That she may rise and bathe in milk.

And for her sake one man has fought
From nothing into full success,
Because she longed for jewels, dress,
And limousines. For her that man
Has builded miles of rails to span
A continent, and so has wrought

A miracle of speed and might,
Because she wished to feel the thrill
That power brings. Do you say still
She is a useless thing to make
A million labor for her sake?
Is she a common parasite?

Beatrice Ashton Vandegrift.



The Meanest Man

By JOHN D. SWAIN

Author of "John Smith and Wife," "So This Is Wedlock," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

GEORGE BANGS sprawled flatly over half a bench on Boston's Common. It was a bland Indian Summer forenoon; he had breakfasted well; his mental hunger was sufficiently appeased by half a newspaper he had retrieved from a rubbish can.

He owned to having a sweet tooth; and even as his rather sleepy eyes passed idly over the printed columns, he sampled from time to time a large lavender-colored all-day sucker he had but fifteen minutes before snatched from an inattentive child as he had passed along the elm-shaded walk that skirts the Frog Pond.

Life was like that, to George Bangs. Things came to him without exertion; necessities, that is. Often he had to forego its luxuries.

A veteran of the Spanish War, drawing an infinitesimal pension for some imaginary ailment contracted in training camp, he had not worked in thirty years.

A young army surgeon with a vein of humor had diagnosed his trouble as *encephalitis lethargia*, which—in Bang's case—meant plain *laziness*.

And yet a certain amount of energy, and above all of ingenuity, was needed to supplement the all too slender pension. He had exercised it this very morning when, waking in a sordid little upper back room of a cheap lodging house, for which he had paid fifty cents in advance, he found himself with his usual excellent appetite, and not a solitary coin with which to gratify it. Was he downhearted? He was not.

Seated upon the sagging edge of his bed, wrapped in thought and a moth-eaten blanket, there stole to his ears the thin, plaintive notes of a hand organ playing far down in the courtyard under his window. A pleased look lighted his slightly bloodshot eyes.

It was not so much that the sound awakened childish memories, as that it connoted a possible monkey. Monkeys have money—pennies which they collect from children who dance to the reedy strains of the organ, and from old folks who look on. Hope lighted her beacon in George Bangs's heart; or rather in his stomach—a noble organ, tape-measuring just under forty-eight inches.



Padding barefoot to the window, which was half open, he peered down. His hope was not without its reward; for, attached to a long string held by the elderly Italian impresario, and cheered thinly by a dozen tenement urchins, was a mangy, emaciated monkey properly clad in red coat and cap and bearing a diminutive tin cup in one paw.

To it George chirruped. The Italian looked up, and at sight of the fat, good-natured face far above him he flashed a white-toothed smile and spoke a word to the already climbing monkey, who had been working his way up the face of the building, pausing at a window here and there for a coin.

Presently its wizened face appeared beside George's unshaven one; it perched on the sill, and extended its rusty little cup. Ten seconds later it was ascending to the next floor above; but the tin cup was empty. The seventeen cents it had contained were in George's pants pocket—enough, through his familiarity with Boston, to buy him a fair breakfast.

Possibly three minutes thereafter, the haunting aria from "*Il Trovatore*" ceased in the courtyard below, to be replaced with a veritable pyrotechnics of Neapolitan grief and rage. The courtyard echoed to the din; the monkey-treasurer, unable to comprehend the infamy of which it had been the victim, shivered before the lash of its master's voice.

The tenement children listened with awed delight; but George Bangs paid but scant attention. He had anticipated something of the sort; people were always making such a silly fuss about money! All people save himself, that is. And he felt

reasonably sure that, among all the lodgers who had come in contact with the monkey and its cup, it would be impossible to identify him.

But fortune had not yet done with him. Even as he dressed, whistling cheerily, his alert nose isolated a pleasing odor among the variety of smells which ascended through his window. The Neapolitan and his ruined treasurer had departed; so, by the silence, had the children.

The courtyard was momentarily deserted, save for a furtive cat foraging in a garbage can. But as George leaned out, following his trusty nose, he saw directly below him, set out on the fire escape to cool, a magnificent baked chicken, its skin all tans and russets and ochres, the fragrant steam rising like incense from its plump breast.

It was destined for a picnic later on—a Polish festivity toward which Mrs. Sclemilski had prepared, as her share, this superb fowl. George Bangs did not struggle with temptation; for he was not tempted. From

the instant that he looked upon this luscious bird, the bare possibility that it might not repose in his capacious stomach was unendurable.

A hurried search in numerous pockets yielded, among other useful things, a serviceable length of twine. There were pins stuck beneath his coat lapel. Quickly one was bent, attached to the string, lowered.

No need of bait here; without too many wasted motions, the crooked pin was lodged beneath a wing, the fragrant fowl rose cautiously and not too swiftly. There were no onlookers; the entire performance did not take two minutes.

Thereafter, George had breakfasted indeed! With a glass of water from his cracked pitcher to wash it down, he had left nothing but the larger and more resistent bones, when—and this time much nearer at hand—there rose for the second time that morning the tumult of outraged humanity. Mrs. Sclemilski had gone to her fire escape, and discovered that it was bare, which, to be sure, was according to the rules and regulations of the Boston fire department, but not according to the plans of the Poniatowski Social Club.

Things were said about the unknown thief which were almost unforgivable; but as they were said in Polish, George Bangs's feelings were spared.

However, he felt that it would be better for him to vacate his room. The cries were getting warmer, and heads were being poked out of windows on three sides, questions hurled, sympathy extended, and suggestions of a neighborhood vigilance committee were heard.

Besides, there was really nothing to detain George any longer. He was not one to crowd his luck. Head erect, filled with the self-respect that the being in funds gives one, he passed down the stairs, through the empty hall, and so out into the street.

He parted with six of his precious pennies for a pack of cigarettes, matches free. And now he was reading his morning paper, as any gentleman might do, amid pleasant surroundings.

He sighed contentedly, raised his all-day

sucker toward his already parted lips, and then, as if instantly congealed, he froze into attention as his eyes fell upon a paragraph in the Help Wanted column.

Let us hasten to do George full justice. He never scanned the columns offering work of all sorts to the unemployed or dissatisfied; and it was only as he turned a page that his eye chanced to light on a phrase that arrested it.

THE MEANEST MAN ALIVE—words so intimate, so personal, could not fail to interest him. For it was George's secret belief—and pride—that in plumb meanness he was the peer of any man in the world. And so he read the advertisement through, slowly and painstakingly, and when he had done he reread it. And this is how it ran:

THE MEANEST MAN ALIVE, if otherwise unengaged, can have a good bed and the very best food and all he wants without having to do a stroke of work in return. State qualifications. No criminals or practical jokers wanted. Address X-31 *Messenger*.

First impression might conceive of this advertisement as an attempt at humor. But it was listed in the Help Wanted department of the Boston *Messenger*, a sedate and old established newspaper. It was carefully printed, the words that had caught his attention, "The Meanest Man Alive," in larger print than the rest. A single insertion must have cost several dollars. It was to be regarded seriously, then.

The idea of applying for this bizarre position did not at first occur to Bangs. Rather, a feeling of resentment filled him. For there would be many answers to this ad; and of all the applicants, what one could compare with him, George Bangs, in simon-pure meanness?

Some one of them, of these many applicants, would be accepted; would lie in a soft bed and eat the very best food—all he wanted of it—without having to work in return; some one who could not hold a candle to George! Some pretender, who thought he was mean because he short-changed a woman clerk, or put a lead nickel into the poor box, or filled his pockets with crackers when he ordered a bowl of soup at a quick-lunch counter!

And this employer, who was spending good money to find an honest-to-goodness mean man, would never know anything about George Bangs and his matchless record!

He let the paper fall at his feet, the all-day sucker likewise, as his eyes half closed and he recalled his noble gifts of meanness, the one trait that made him an outstanding citizen.

He did not consider the many little stratagems whereby he picked up loose change as in any sense mean. His haunting of the long line of telephone booths in the North and South Terminals, for instance; where, in the hurry of train time, many impatient callers abandon their nickel and run. When later on the operator sets in motion the contraption that restores their nickel in the little curved slot, it is finder's money; and persistent work had cleared as high as two dollars and a half in a single forenoon, for George Bangs.

Strange things happen. On one never-to-be-forgotten occasion he had idly looked into a booth just as there came a little ring and a frosty tinkle, and out poured a veritable river of quarters, dimes, and nickels; more than three dollars' worth! Some poor fish had been trying to get a far distant point, and had had to dash off to catch his train. Usually, of course, the stuff came in dribs and drabs of five cents each.

But this occupation was not without its hazards. There were plenty of others who knew all about these telephone booths; they were the perquisite of the depot porters and scrubmen; and more than once one of them had chased George off, forcing him to travel far faster than was safe for one of his years and poundage—one, moreover, afflicted with *encephalitis lethargia*.

There was another and much safer way of picking up stray coins. If he could bring himself to get up very early, when the trolley cars were loaded down with workingmen clinging to steps and guards, hanging on with one hand and making change with the other, he could by following certain lines that led toward the factory and foundry districts pick up along the track a pleasant gleanings of nickels and dimes, with an occasional quarter. But

the "Pay as you enter" cars had about spoiled this line. And these methods of earning a living were in no sense *mean*. George Bangs had never prided himself on them.

His milk route was something more to the point. He was very fond of milk; many a time he had made a fair luncheon from it alone. And he was fastidious, too; none of your mixed-herd stuff for him! Only the certified brands.

To get this, one strolled anywhere out through the Public Gardens, or beyond in the Fenway, wherever nursemaids trundled babies. They were always gadding about, these maids, with one another, or a mounted cop, or perhaps a fresh Harvard chap, or what had they to talk to.

It was easy, walking slowly along and pretending to read a newspaper, to reach slyly out and yank a bottle of milk out of a perambulator. Of course, now and then the kid would set up a terrible yowl about it; but there were nearly always plenty of babies asleep, or anyhow not hungry at the moment, who made not the slightest fuss when the large, hairy hand of a perfect stranger despoiled them of their bottle, rubber tip and all.

Now and then some millionaire kid had such a swell flask—one of the newfangled sort without the rubber tip, and silver mounted, that George kept it and later hocked it at some pawnshop. Usually he simply chucked the thing away when he had emptied it.

He knew just which baby had the best milk; not from any scrutiny of the babies themselves, which all looked alike to him, but from their turnouts, the class of the nurse girls, that sort of thing. He loved nothing better than a fine, warm draft of modified milk; and many a gallon of it had he put away in Boston's justly esteemed parks!

He was willing to bet that no applicant, writing of his qualifications in reply to this strange advertisement, could show anything matching that for meanness! And there were other deeds, too; plenty of them.

He had not, he admitted with shame, ever robbed a blind man of his pennies; but this was hardly his fault. He had tried

it on Tremont Street once, in front of an ancient and aristocratic department store where all the swell dames shop, and a tall, bony blind man had his stand, or rather his camp chair. His cup held only about fifteen cents; these blind men, George had observed, never let much accumulate in them. Made them look too prosperous.

Well, more from sheer bravado than anything else, he had reached for the fifteen cents; and his hand hadn't so much as touched the rim of the cup when that blind man—the crook—rose halfway from his chair and crowned George! Yes, sir, almost flattened his nose on his pan. Could you beat it? And the police standing for him posing as *blind!* But the police were as crooked as anybody they pinched; that was George's firm belief.

Other mean things he had done over a long period, the best part of his life, passed in review before his half closed eyes, as he sat there on the bench on the Common. And for the first time he realized that nobody but himself knew how mean he really was.

His light had been hidden under a bushel. In his time he would die and be gathered to his fathers, and carry his secret with him into the unknown.

In every funeral he had known anything about, the clergyman had been at pains to find out something eulogistic he could say about the deceased; some few kind words to speak before the poor body was consigned to oblivion. But when George Bangs came to the great adventure, who would tip the dominie off—whisper into his ear that he was about to perform the last sad rites over the meanest man in Boston, if not indeed in New England, or possibly the whole wide world?

A tear stole from one eye and ran into the corner of his mouth. Absent-mindedly he reached down and picked up the all-day sucker and licked it. Also he picked up the newspaper, found the weird want ad, and tore it carefully out.

There could be no harm in answering it; if he could obtain an interview with the sender, he might at least convince one living witness of his talents in the way of unadulterated meanness! As for the job—

any job—he didn't take much interest in that. Of course, it would be pleasant to eat all one could, of the very best the market afforded.

One hour later George Bangs left at the office of the *Messenger* a folded scrap of brown paper which he had fished out of a rubbish can. It was addressed to X 31; and he lingered for a moment, hoping that the clerk at the desk might recognize the peculiar nature of the advertisement inserted by X 31, and inquire of George Bangs as to his record in the way of meanness; but the clerk, a sniffy flapper, took the paper without more than a cool glance at the shabby fat man, dropped it into its proper pigeonhole, murmured "Aw right!" and turned to resume a conversation she was holding with another young thing.

There was in youth to-day no reverence whatever, George sadly mused as he left the office. With the best intentions in the world, that young woman would never rise to the heights of meanness he had achieved!

II.

It was two days later that George Bangs was given a letter by the clerk at the General Delivery window of the post office. These past two nights he had slept at the Charity House, where for a bed and a breakfast, of sorts, he had been obliged to saw much wood. This irked him deeply, but not as much as the further requirement that each inmate take a cold shower in the morning upon rising. But his pension check was not due for a week and luck had not been with him during the past day or so.

He turned aside, and by the light that sifted in through a dusty and smoke-grimed window read the prim lines written with a stub pen on plain white paper. The letter was in reply to his note left at the *Messenger* office, and read:

SIR:

Yrs rec'd and contents noted. In response to same would state that I will interview you in person. Will be at South Terminal waiting room, in the Essex County section, on Wednesday at ten o'clock in the morning, and will wait for you there a reasonable time.

I assume from your answer to my adt. and the general tone thereof that your time is

not especially valuable and that it will not be necessary for you to keep me waiting over-long.

I am an elderly woman, and very plain in features and dress, and shall be wearing a simple black dress with long skirt and a small black hat without trimming. Will explain fully what is expected of you at place and time mentioned.

Very truly,
(Mrs.) ELLEN SPROUL.

"Huh!" mused George. "A jane. And by her own account, a sad looker. Wonder what her game is?"

He placed the missive carefully in his inside coat pocket, counted his small change and found that it totted up to a little less than twenty cents.

Down on Atlantic Avenue on the water front a little cockney kept a stall where for fifteen cents one could get fried fish and potato chips and a dill pickle; coffee was extra. Thither George made his way, retrieving from a waste-paper basket a couple of morning papers to read while he lunched.

Already he half repented the impulse that had led him to answer that advertisement. Nothing had been farther from his thoughts than to apply for a job of any sort. George was one who prized his freedom. But the wording had probed at his weakest point.

The meanest man alive. Those were the very words. Never before had he heard of anybody wishing to hire a man of that type, for any purpose whatsoever.

To be sure, men were often hired to do despicable things, even to commit murder. It was said, how truly he did not know, that for fifteen dollars one could hire anybody killed, if only he knew in what part of the underworld to apply. But this advertisement had distinctly stated that no criminal need answer.

His mind was still busy with the problem when he sidled into the tiny cupboard, a place not more than five feet wide and twelve deep, with three small tables, and at the end a counter on which bubbled a huge caldron of hot fat. Into this kettle Alfred, the proprietor, thrust chunks of trimmed fish; any sort of fish; but at least fresh.

Small boys brought and sold to him their catches from the wharves. Italian fishermen fetched baskets of odds and ends so small or so badly mangled that they were otherwise unsalable. Alfred, armed with a knife and cleaver, rudely dressed his raw material into fairish sized chunks and dropped them into the deep fat.

When a customer entered he speared one of the pieces with a long fork and placed it on a large plate, together with a mound of potato chips from another and smaller kettle, and a flabby dill pickle from a great jar. A large, tarnished urn stood behind him, and for another nickel Alfred would draw half a pint of rank coffee mitigated with cold milk and as much sugar as the customer liked. On the whole, a nourishing and filling meal for twenty cents.

George Banks could not quite make up the full twenty cents, and had to eke out his fish-and-chips with lukewarm water. He took his time, being something of an epicure. He had drawn a large hunk of nice haddock, as good and much fresher than he would have paid fifty cents for in an uptown restaurant. He chewed his food with relish, read the two newspapers through, paid his score and moved on.

If during the next twenty-four hours a bit of luck had come his way, he would probably have passed up his interview with the mysterious Mrs. Sproul. It would not have troubled him in the least to cause her to take the journey, and to wait for him in vain.

But on Tuesday night he was again obliged to seek refuge at the Charity House, to saw more wood, and on Wednesday morning to take another perfectly needless bath. On leaving, and now with only three cents in his pockets, he was ready for any venture, however desperate.

A little bit of luck had come his way, at that. One of the destitute men had died the day before; and his clothes had been distributed among the other inmates when he was haled away to the morgue. It chanced that he had been wearing a very decent suit of blue serge, very much too large for anybody present except George Bangs, who therefore drew it, and discarded his own dirty and frayed gray clothes.

A pair of stout shoes went with it, and a blue polka-dot necktie. So that, although nearly penniless, George looked more prosperous than he had in many months.

He was so pleased with the general effect that he begged the superintendent to give him a clean collar; and having brushed his floppy felt hat and shined his shoes, he stepped forth into the sunshine with a certain self-respect and an assurance that was quite deceptive.

He was obliged to walk clear up to Scolay Square, off which run a number of little old streets on which are coffee-houses which sell a small cup for three cents. This, with the tasteless breakfast the Charity House had supplied, would sustain him nicely until ten o'clock, the hour of his appointment.

He had hopes of wheedling a lunch out of Mrs. Sproul, and possibly a little advance money. His first thought, on answering the advertisement, had been to find a listener, and to prove his claims to the largest niche in the Hall of Meanness. Too long had his gifts been withheld from an admiring world!

Now he was beginning to be anxious lest he fail to obtain the position. Never had his fortunes been at lower ebb. It was with something almost akin to nervousness that he turned into the South Terminal and made his way to the waiting room just on the hour of ten.

He understood the arrangement spoken of in the letter. The waiting room is divided into compartments of facing seats, like huge pews, over each of which is printed a sign bearing the name of a county of Massachusetts. Without difficulty he found the one devoted to Essex; and with equal ease he identified the one he sought.

There were three men and two women seated in this section; but one of the latter was a mere girl, a flapper. Unerringly he faced the other—a small, gray-haired woman in black, whose sharp eyes scrutinized him through steel-rimmed spectacles.

George touched his hat, and grinned affably. "I knew you right off the bat, lady! Yer description was perfect."

He had carefully thought out this greeting, and was rather proud of it. Sounded as mean as anything he could think of; for

his correspondent had admitted her lack of attractiveness in dress and person, and it was this which George cordially conceded.

But he was not able to read in her face whether she appreciated the artistry of his opening remark. She nodded shortly, but did not take the hand George extended.

"Set right down here," she commanded.

Their pew was otherwise unoccupied. Across from them two of the men were engaged in low-toned conversation; the third was furtively watching the pretty girl, who was reading a tabloid paper.

"You don't look specially mean to me!" Mrs. Sproul remarked. "You look more shiftless and no-account."

A hurt look overspread George's rather flabby face. He gazed earnestly upon the woman whose advertisement he had answered.

She was probably sixty years old, he decided, and she did nothing whatever to make herself appear any younger. Her gray hair was not bobbed, but drawn tightly back from her face, which was pale and yellowish white, without a sign of rouge or powder.

She had a determined chin and very sharp eyes, and her hands, while well kept, were gnarled as from years of work in hot water or grasping a mop and broom. The only touch of ornament about her was a large old-fashioned cameo pin, or brooch, at her throat, about which was a little pleated white collar.

She wore high shoes, laced, and her skirt came below their tops. From the country, he guessed. Tight, but not poor.

His heart sank as he finished his brief survey. Mrs. Sproul was speaking again, and George hastened to interrupt.

"Lady, a meaner man than what I am don't walk the streets of Boston? I ain't proud; there's plenty in my life to be ashamed of, and keep me low-spirited. But I won't give second to *no* man, nor woman nor child either, on plumb *meanness*. It's all I've got, and I won't have it disputed!"

The woman's eyes softened surprisingly. She reached forth a thin hand, and patted George on his knee.

"There, there!" she soothed. "Tell me about yourself. About some of the mean things you have done."

He pulled himself together, began to rehearse some of the better of his exploits. He did not think it wise to mention the filching of the baked fowl from the fire escape; this, and kindred choice morsels, might savor too much of criminality in this prim old lady's code of ethics. But he dwelt upon his depredations in the way of babies' milk bottles and children's all-day suckers.

It seemed to George, watching her eagerly for approval, that she was not as impressed as she should have been. Indeed, when he paused to draw breath, she remarked quietly: "But you see, these are all more or less childish, Mr. Bangs! And anyhow, my husband is not addicted to modified milk, nor to candy."

"Your husband?" echoed George blankly. "What's he got to do with it?"

"Everything," declared Mrs. Sproul. "Perhaps before we go further into your gifts of meanness, I might as well outline the situation which confronts me."

She settled herself more comfortably, drew a long breath, and launched into a recital with which she was evidently perfectly familiar, and the details of which gave her genuine satisfaction.

"I am the last of the Millers, of Miller's Creek, which, as you know, is up near the New Hampshire State line. We have always been the first family of the town, or village rather. I still have the deed by which the Indian chieftain, Hoseas, transferred thirty thousand acres of land, embracing the old township, to my great-great-grandfather, Thomas. He paid Hoseas a gallon of rum and two beaver hats."

"Yeah," commented George. "And I bet when old chief Whoosis had finished the rum he couldn't wear either hat!"

"It was a very fair price indeed," Mrs. Sproul went on primly. "A very great number of the early settlers seized the land from the Indians without paying them anything at all for it. But please don't interrupt me! What I am trying to explain to you is that we Millers have always maintained a certain position in Miller's Creek. None of us have been rich, but neither were any of us ever poor."

"And now, I am the last one of the lot.

I live in the old Miller homestead, built on the same cellar hole left when the first settler, Thomas, lost his home by fire way back in the French and Indian Wars. I sit on Sundays in the same pew in the Congregational Church that we have held for more than a hundred and fifty years. It is high-backed, with a little wooden door and a brass lock."

"To keep you from sneakin' out during the long prayer," guessed George; but his pleasantry passed unnoticed as Mrs. Sproul continued her story.

"As I remarked, I am the last of my race. And about five years ago I was foolish enough to get myself married. It was sort of lonesome in the big old house; I wasn't in love—my time for romance had long since elapsed. And I didn't expect any children. But it seemed as if it would be sociable to have a man around that belonged to me. There was a hired man and a girl, but I wanted some one of my own. And so I got myself married to Mr. Sproul, Ernest Sproul, who was a comparative newcomer to our town, having arrived about fifteen years previously, and opened a store.

"Hardware, Soft Drinks, and Dry Goods' his sign read; and he did a fair business. But I guess he didn't have much get-up and get to him. Soon as he was married he sold out and retired; and it seems that he didn't have anywhere near the money folks thought he had. Mind you, I hadn't married him for his money! Had all I needed. But at the same time I didn't calculate to support a healthy man on money earned by my own Godfearing forbears."

She paused, looked into George's sleepy eyes to see if her tale was registering. It was. "Looks like this Ernest man figured he was marrying an heiress, and easing himself into a soft berth, ma'am!"

Mrs. Sproul nodded.

"That's so. And a more useless critter about a home you never saw. Cluttering up the place with his old pipes and every cheap fiction magazine that comes out, reading and dozing and eating like all get-out! Crabbed, too. Always got out of bed the wrong side, the least bit of overeating—and he was forever doing that—gave him

heart-burn, and then he was tarnation ugly! And each night after he goes to bed, and in the mornings before he gets up, he has a habit of clearing his throat and heming and hawing, that 'd drive a saint crazy.

"So, seeing how mismated we was, I suggested we separate peaceable like, and go our ways. But that didn't suit him at all. He said it was all right for me to talk about going our separate ways; but that only meant him going his; all I had to do was to stay right on where I was. The only one to suffer would be *him*. It would inconvenience him mightyly. Mean he'd have to get him another business, and go to work. He was living too easy as it was. So I couldn't budge him."

George nodded, wondering just where he horned into this prosy village drama.

"Mind you," Mrs. Sproul went on, "I didn't want any divorce. Let me get rid of this one, and I never wanted to clap eyes on another man in the family! But there he was; I couldn't very well *throw* him out. He hadn't exactly done anything actionable. Too smart for that. One of these smooth, pious critters, asking a blessing every meal, reading from the Scripture every night, boasting that he had no vices—bar his pipe. And all the time, mean as pussley.

"I couldn't take a mite of comfort in my own home; the one that had sheltered whole regiments of Millers! Sneaky, he was, too; I was always missing small amounts from the cracked sugar bowl where I kept money for convenience. Tried to git me to make over my bank account into a joint one. Buyin' things, and having them charged, and then when the bill came in, it was I had to pay. He hadn't anything! Or, if he has, he's got it hid so cute I can't find trace of hide nor hair.

"Finally, this idea come to me; the notion of advertising for somebody even meaner than what he is, and getting him to come live with us and making my husband so uncomfortable that he'd ruther get out than not. And that's how I came to write that advertising piece, which you saw and answered."

George's eyes popped. "But what'd happen to me if I did come? I got no rights there, coming between man and wife, and

your old man would kick me clear across the town lines if I tried it!"

Mrs. Sproul smiled.

"Oh, I planned that all out! Listen. I said I was the last of my family left; and I s'pose that is so. But I had a younger brother, William. After mother died, he and I lived on with father in the old homestead. I kept house, and William helped run the farm.

"My father was a hard man. He prided himself on being stern but just. I can see, lookin' back, that he was no sort of a man to bring up a young, high-spirited boy. Didn't matter so much about me; long as I cooked three meals of victuals a day, and washed the clothes, and swept and mopped, churned, helped milk the cows, put up jellies and preserves, and pickles, and salt down beef and pork, and mend the men folks' clothes, and didn't ask for no spending money, father let me run my own gait. But with William, 'twas different.

"He was a fine, handsome lad, popular with the village boys and girls, and naturally he liked his good times. Nothing vicious about him; just good wholesome fun. But father kept his nose right down to the grindstone. Didn't believe in dancing. Wouldn't let him read modern novels. Thwarted him in every way. And so William ran away to sea when he was only fourteen years old. And that's the last we ever see of him. Father lived on for more'n ten years, and then he died; and then I was alone, till I went crazy with the heat, or something, and up and married this Ernest Sproul."

"This brother then, is dead?" George asked.

"Must be. I got post cards from him—never was any hand to write much—from queer ports at the other end of the world. One or two a year. Once he sent me some pretty silk throw-on, from Spain. And then a letter come from Liverpool, saying he was second mate of a three-master, and wanted I should leave father and join him and we'd set up housekeeping together somewhere in England. I couldn't do that; father was in his last sickness, then; it was my duty to stand by. I wrote and told him so, to the address he give me.

"Time passed; another letter come, and it seemed he was put out with me. He was still on the outs with father; never got over the way he was treated as a boy. And to this letter I wrote him a real stiff reply. Told him the Bible threatened children that deserted their parents. That he had no business to harbor resentment against an old, dying man, who had brought him into the world. Told him to come home like a man and make his peace, and that it wasn't decent to leave me alone to bear all the brunt. I never heard a word since; and that was more'n twenty year ago."

George Bangs nodded. "I get you, lady! You want I should come and pass myself off as Brother William. Is that it?"

"That was in my mind," admitted Mrs. Sproul. "You'd have a right there, as co-heir with me of the old homestead. Ernest could not turn you out. And I figured, if I could get a man mean enough to drive him to distraction, he'd up and leave of his own accord. And to such a man I'd give the very best sort of a home; a warm bed, all he could eat of the best home-cooked victuals, attention if he was sick, and no work to do."

"Sounds right in my line," admitted George. "I'd just admire to prove to you how mean I can be when I set out! But I couldn't pass myself off as your brother in a small town. I probably don't look like him, to begin with."

"Who's going to remember how a boy looked thirty years ago? Or how much he'd change, cruising all over the world? My husband never clapped eyes on him; I told you he was a newcomer. Most of the old folks that could remember William, are dead and buried years back. The rest of 'em is wandering in their wits. If I recognized you and accepted you as my brother, who is there to dispute it?"

George scratched one ear. The notion appealed to him. He liked good food and a warm bed, with nothing to do in return. He could save his pension money almost intact. And above all, he could establish his claims to the Mean Man's Championship.

It would be both safe and amusing to exercise his ingenuity on Mr. Ernest

Sproul, himself a man of no small pretensions to meanness, if this old dame spoke the truth! His musing was interrupted by her voice.

"But somehow, I can't figure you out as really mean at all! Your mean acts seem sort of triflin'. Like what you said about the policemen, and when the law was passed that they must all wear white cotton gloves, and pay for 'em themselves, and you went around and greased all the neighborhood doorknobs, so that when at night the police went around to try if the doors was locked, they all spoiled their gloves and had to buy new. Now that was just like a schoolboy! Same idea as smokin' the teacher out at district school; or throwin' spitballs."

George looked grieved and depressed; but before he could defend himself, Mrs. Sproul added: "Still, there's this to be said. I might get me a real, sure-enough mean man, and find him so low-down that he'd drive *me* away from home instead of my husband! You seem sort of innocent-like to me. What I mean is, there's something pathetic about you. Like a boy that never growed up. And I'd feel safe to have you in the house. I guess I can't have ev'rything just as I want, and must take a chance with you. If you fail me, and can't think up mean things enough to do to drive Ernest away, then I'll have to let you go and advertise again."

So it was settled. Being penniless, George suggested a little money in advance, and to his surprise, Mrs. Sproul did not object.

"I shall pay you fifteen dollars a week, besides your keep," she said. "And I'll give you five on account of the first week, now."

George pocketed the five.

"But how about clothes?" he asked. "I've got nothing but what I stand in. Your brother would have some sort of a kit with him. He wouldn't come empty-handed!"

Mrs. Sproul agreed; but she refused to hand over to him a sum for his outfitting. Instead, she offered to go with him and buy whatever seemed needed; and rather unwillingly, George led her up Atlantic

Avenue, lined with sailors' slop-shops, ship chandleries, pawn shops, and notion stores.

In the very first place they visited, a prize was found; nothing less than an old, soiled, yet serviceable leather kit bag that by the hotel and steamship tags gummed to it must have covered many thousands of miles. It was hers, for two dollars; and it gave to George Bangs the air of a much-traveled man.

In other shops, a sufficient supply of underwear and socks and shirts was bought, with an extra pair of stout boots and a nautical cap.

"I ought to have a parrot," George suggested. "One of the sort that swears in Spanish."

But Mrs. Sproul vetoed this idea. It caused her to recall a point she had forgotten, however; and she asked: "Do you happen to have any tattoo marks on you?"

"Yes, ma'am!" he eagerly replied, his fingers beginning to unbutton his shirt front.

"Never mind!" she hastily interrupted. "I can take your word for it. But it will help carry out the seafaring story. I s'pose you never was at sea?"

"I was cook on a tugboat two seasons. I can talk the lingo all right!"

Mrs. Sproul nodded with satisfaction. They had returned to the South Terminal; and here she bought for him a one-way ticket to Miller's Creek, and handed it to him with a time-table.

For the better part of an hour she told him all he needed to know about her town; the names of the few people living, who would remember William Miller. The lay-out of the streets, and the principal buildings; a tale soon told. Then, her own train made up, she left him with a cordial handshake, and departed for home.

That night George Bangs bought all the magazines he could find which specialized in marine stories. Being in funds, and with important luggage to tote, he took a small room in a cheap, but respectable hotel; and until his eyes crossed and he could no longer keep awake, he read story after story of pirates, smugglers, gambling on trans-Atlantic liners, typhoons, wrecks, castaways, lagoons, shanghaied sailors, and

filled his mind with a jumble of seafaring phrases and terms. He was fully sold to the idea of assuming, the next day, a brand new personality.

III.

THERE were forty-three voters resident in Miller's Creek. It was usually the first town to report in State elections; and there was a saying that had become a sort of shibboleth: As Miller's Creek goes, so goes the State. Crowds watching the bulletin boards laughed and cheered when the loud speaker announced: "Miller's Creek goes Republican by twenty-four to eleven! God save the Commonwealth of Massachusetts!"

On a bright November morning, a quorum of the village electorate lounged about the little wooden depot awaiting the arrival of the down train from Boston, the one which brought the city newspapers, the mail, and now and then a traveling salesman or a duck hunter.

There were no factories or mills here. It was a rolling country of pleasant farms. Now, with frost already on the pumpkins and the corn standing in shocks, with the apple crop in and the grapes gathered, the men found plenty of time on their hands.

The Boston train clattered in, came to a stop. The mail bag was heaved onto the platform, some boxes and kegs were unloaded for the general store. The conductor waddled fatly down the steps of the smoker, and spoke familiarly to the men standing about.

From the engine cab a smoke-streaked face crowned by a dirty blue cap peered forth. And then, the surprise, the unexpected, the hope of which brought the male population here day after day!

A strange man alighted; a passenger unknown to any one present, one whose business could not be guessed in this quiet hamlet sprawled comfortably almost on the State line.

He was a chunky man, with a fat, amiable face. He was dressed in loose blue serge, with stout boots and a visored cap. In one plump hand, he bore a worn bag which was literally covered with gummed labels bearing the names of strange cities

and alluring hotels, steamship lines, outlandish places.

There was even one which was printed in Chinese ideographs; another, equally undecipherable to those still, beady eyes on the platform, was in Hungarian. The bearer paused halfway to the depot door, looked quizzically about him and addressed the loiterers impersonally.

"Yo, ho! My hearties. Anybody here happen to know Miss Miller? Ellen Miller? And whether she's still tied up at the old anchorage?"

A tall, lanky man nominated himself spokesman. He spat a rich mouthful of tobacco juice onto the right of way before answering:

"Ellen Miller? Mean Mrs. Sproul, don't ye?"

George Bangs set down his bag, removed his cap and wiped his brow with a soiled bandanna. "Why, mebbe so. She might of married, of course. But I knew her as Ellen Miller, only darter of old Peter, living up the turnpike in the old Miller homestead."

The lanky one nodded. "That's her. She's been married a matter of five year or so. Feller name of Ernest Sproul; used to run the hardware store here."

The stocky man in blue serge seemed surprised. His little eyes blinked in their folds of white fat, his flabby mouth pursed.

"Well, blast my timbers! So Ellen's spliced? Now, who'd of thought that. Never was no hand at all for the boys, Ellen wan't."

To this comment there was no reply. The men of Miller's Creek, inquisitive to a degree, were a silent breed in the presence of a stranger.

Not one there but yearned to fire a volley of questions at him. Who was he? Where did he come from, and why? What business had he with their townswoman, Mrs. Sproul?

But they bottled up their curiosity, and continued to stare unwinkingly at George, their jaws moving, the older men chewing tobacco, the youths masticating gum, one or two smoking cigarettes.

The new arrival drew from his pocket a very shiny pipe of brier, blew shrilly

through it as through a boson's whistle, filled it from a cloth bag, struck a match with his thumbnail and lighted up. When his pipe was drawing well, he looked over the ring of loungers.

"Any likely lad here want to tote my Dunnage far's Ellen's—as Mrs. Sproul's? There's a shillin' in it for the one speaks first!"

There was no mad rush to secure the bag, although nearly every man and boy present would gladly have carried it twice the distance required, for a thin dime. After a moment, a gangly youth of perhaps fourteen stepped forward.

He walked sneakily, on the balls of his feet, and his freckled face crimsoned as he thus thrust himself into the limelight. He leaned over and the fingers of one hand fastened like talons on the handle of the worn grip. Then, without a word, he turned and made off toward the end of the platform.

George Bangs followed him, waving a genial hand at the staring group behind him. "See ye later, when I git my bearin's," he called.

He was conscious that as soon as he was out of earshot, a gabble of talk started on the depot platform. Released from his presence, these old neighbors burst into a frenzy of speculation.

But he could not make out any phrases, or even words, as he lounged after the youth who had volunteered to carry his bag. So he began to converse with him.

"What might your name be, sonny?"

"Potter. Lem Potter."

George seemed surprised. "Well, well! Don't tell me you're the son of old man Potter, of this town?"

Lem blushingly confessed that it was even so. "How'd you come to know my old man?" he asked.

"How old is he?" George countered.

"Goin' on forty-five."

"An' how long's he lived round these parts?"

"Why, all his life, o' course! He was born right here. So was ma. She was a Dunning."

George nodded. "Thought so! Well, when you git home, you ask your old man

to remember back to when he was 'bout fifteen or so, and does he mind him of Willie Miller. He'll give ye an earful, unless he's lost his memory or something."

Lem nodded without replying. He felt that he had very shrewdly led his employer to reveal his identity; and he slightly hastened his gait, anxious to get back and tell his news. It would put him in the lime-light for a moment; a place where he seldom basked.

He could not recall ever hearing of any William Miller; probably some relation to old Mrs. Ellen. Brother, maybe. Though they didn't look alike! His father would clear all that up; or, any of the loafers at the depot; the old-timers, that is.

Whatever the past of this William, it would be raked up and spread out and picked over until not a cold clinker was left untouched. Maybe he'd been in prison; he looked sort of fat and white and unwholesome. Anyhow, *something* would have kept him away from Miller's Creek all these years!

Lem wondered if Ellen Sproul would be glad to see him. It was lucky he'd offered to tote his bag. He'd watch close, and be able to tell the neighbors just exactly what happened at the reunion. This was a great day for the town! Nothing so exciting had happened in a year.

No further talk enlightened their journey, which was only a matter of half a mile up the turnpike. At a bend in the road, a gaunt old two-story-and-a-half house loomed in sight. It was a noble edifice, though badly in need of paint in front.

The ends were of brick; at least, the end George could see was, and he assumed that the other one was also. There was a front door of eight panels, with a brass knocker, and a good fanlight. A few dejected-looking zinnias still bloomed in the ample front yard. At the rear was a sturdier bloom, in more vivid coloring, where a clothesline flapped in the stiff November breeze, and red flannel and figured calico contended and strove to escape.

Lem Potter thrust aside the gate with one foot, and led the way up a flagged walk. He did not propose to miss the meeting; and before George could speak, the boy

had reached up and hammered on the stout oak with the big knocker. He still clung to the valise. It seemed to give him an excuse for staying on.

There was a long delay. The lad turned his head, spoke:

"Sproul ain't to home. He drove over to the cattle show at Derry. But I guess Mrs. Sproul's somewhere about."

"Drove over to Derry, did he?" George echoed, pleased to learn that his meeting with the head of the house was to be delayed. "Got a car, has he?"

"Nope. Concord buggy. The old Miller one fixed up. But a new horse; one he got last year at the county fair."

The words were just out of his mouth, when the great door swung inward, and Ellen Sproul confronted them. Her determined chin jutted out, her beady eyes swept the two.

Her thin arms were folded; it seemed to George that she might, had she wished, completely girdled her own waspish waist and clasped her hands at the back.

The woman nodded. "Morning, Lem!" Then, cold eyes on George, she snapped: "Don't want nothing to-day! Too many peddlers and canvassers round. Drive me to distraction—"

George smiled fatuously, extended his arms, watched with an almost ferocious attention by the boy. "Ellen—dear Ellen! Have I changed so much? Don't you know me?"

A change came over the pale face of the old woman; a change that would have done credit to any actress. Her eyes widened, her thin lips parted, a smile crinkled all over her face, and it seemed as if her heart skipped three or four beats. Her arms unclasped, were extended yearningly toward the strange man.

"William!" she gasped. "My little brother Willie! Come back to me, and to his home, at last!"

She toppled forward, and George swept her into his arms, supporting her there on the doorstep, which was composed of half of a gigantic grindstone.

In an instant Ellen recovered, drew herself away, stiffened. She stepped back, throwing wide the door.

"Come right in," she invited, almost primly, as if feeling that she had overacted her part.

George fished in his pocket, handed the boy a quarter, picked up his own bag, and a second later the door shut. Lem Potter raced through the yard and down the turnpike, to the depot where, as he well knew the quorum would still be present, on pins and needles to get his report.

IV.

THE roads from Derry were filled with cars large and small, and the cars were filled with happy people. There were very few horse-drawn vehicles; the cattle show itself had exhibited almost everything but livestock.

The age of jazz had entirely changed the character of these old country fairs. To-day, the principal Derry event was the automobile racing.

In one of the few buggies which jogged toward Miller's Creek sat Mr. Ernest Sproul, as happy in his bloodless way as any one well could be. He was a curious and somewhat unusual type of Yankee.

A tremendous eater, his food did not seem to nourish him, and he was thin to the point of emaciation. He had a narrow face, long nose, mean eyes, and a little button mouth.

A born trader, shrewd and calculating, and a miser of parts, he so far followed an old New England tradition, only to branch off surprisingly. For Ernest was lazy.

Indeed, there was between him and George Bangs no little resemblance. Both liked the good things of life, and neither was willing to work for them. And, although George would have resented this hotly, Ernest would have given him a hard battle for the title of Meanest Man Alive.

Sproul had done well with his store. The fact that he hated to work did not prevent him from being a good business man. He had a positive genius for screwing hard work out of other people, and for paying them small wages therefor.

After some years, he sold out his good will, stock, and business to the proprietor of the general store, who was in a sense his

only rival. How much money he had banked, nobody but he knew. It was mostly in the Derry Savings Bank, although he had made some sound investments in railroad stock, municipal bonds, and other safe offerings of the market.

Shortly after retiring, he had married Ellen Miller for good and sufficient reasons. She was heiress to the estate of her father, old Peter. There had been a brother; but he was dead. Legally so, at any rate.

Sproul, of course, had never seen him; had come to Miller's Creek a decade after the young brother of Ellen had vanished. And Ellen lived in the largest Colonial house in the village, a home unencumbered by mortgage, and surrounded by two hundred acres of land, embracing much standing timber, hard and soft, arable fields, a meadow that extended on both banks of sleepy Miller Creek, a herd of Alderneys, two horses, pigs, poultry, and a hired man and girl to do the work.

Also, and not the least consideration, Ellen was a famous cook in a region where victuals were highly esteemed, and prepared in the old-fashioned way. It was a chance glimpse of the clean, dry cellar that had removed Sproul's last doubts as to the value of bachelorhood.

Along one side of the cellar was ranged a series of bins half filled with clean white sand, in which were squashes, beets, carrots, parsnips, potatoes, cabbages, turnips, and other vegetables kept over the winter. From rafters hung strings of onions, peppers, dried apples, and herbs.

There was a barrel of salt pork, a keg of mackerel, and one of corned beef. Great home-smoked hams and flitches of bacon hung on hooks. And two immense casks, one containing vinegar, the other cider well on its way to becoming vinegar.

One ecstatic survey of this cellar, a survey in which eyes and nose joined, and Ernest Sproul was ready to surrender his liberty. To Ellen, lonesome in her great house, and to the village at large, it was a highly suitable alliance.

Both had means: there was no question of one or the other "marrying for money." The social status of both was good; though the Millers always had a little edge on

everybody else, having been the first settlers.

Ernest Sproul had found matrimony all he had hoped for, and more. If Ellen was disappointed, she did not for a long time admit it, even to herself. But gradually she came to see that she had merely taken in a non-paying boarder.

Not a stroke of work would Sproul do. Why should he? Jake Lummis, the hired man, looked after the farm; though, to be sure, he could not begin to do it properly: help was harder and harder to get, and little by little the Miller farm was given over to hay.

Inside, the hired girl, Jennie, looked after things. Sproul read, and smoked, and ate through the days. When the notion took him, he hitched up horse to buggy, and rode about the countryside.

Now and then he made a trip to Boston; never taking his wife with him. He did nothing whatever out of the way there, merely nosed around, window-shopped, perhaps went to a movie. He was an extremely pious man, a regular church attendant, unfailing in his custom of asking a blessing at meals and reading a chapter from the Scriptures at bedtime.

Incidentally, it may be said that he was thoroughly sincere in all this. He believed himself to be a truly religious man, with eternal felicity as his portion.

And so, jogging along in the comfortable old Concord buggy, the target of good natured gibes tossed back at him from swiftly speeding roadsters and sedans and touring cars as they shot past, Ernest was as happy as it was possible for one of his disposition to be.

It would have been possible to get a very good meal back in Derry, at the cattle show, or in the hotel; but this would cost him his own money. He would be late home to supper, but Ellen would keep something warm for him. He paid the grocery and provision bills, and was entitled to his reward. That was practically all he did pay, save what little he spent on his clothes.

The taxes and upkeep of the house and farm were borne by his wife, which was just and reasonable, since they belonged to her. She also paid the wages of the hired

man and girl, but they ate at his expense. Not wholly, for the farm produced a large proportion of their food, and in addition brought in quite an income from vegetables, hay, wood, maple syrup, eggs, butter, milk, apples.

That Ellen refused to share this surplus with him wounded him deeply. He felt that she ought to have done so. Were they twain not one flesh? Indeed, could he have managed to get his hands on any part of what she took in, he would not have scrupled to do so.

But she was shrewd, almost as shrewd as he. And of late there had been many unpleasant scenes between them. Good man as he was, a model husband as he saw himself, Ellen actually wanted to get rid of him! To turn him adrift, at his age, to shift for himself!

Not that he hadn't plenty laid by to take care of himself. But wherever he might go, it would not be *home*.

He knew when he was well enough off. And if Ellen was as sensible as she looked, she would see things eye to eye with him. Woman her age needed a man around the house! Some man beside pottering old Jake Lummis.

It was dark when he drove around the house and into the stable, calling out for Jake to come and unhitch and feed his horse. The kitchen was brightly lighted, and his ears caught the clatter of dishes and of talk.

Supper was not yet over. They ate in the kitchen, save on rare occasions, as when they had the minister and his wife to dinner, or Ellen entertained her sewing circle once a year.

Ernest Sproul speeded up. The pleasantly exhilarating day, the long drive home in the wintry air, had given him an even better appetite than usual. His nostrils were already quivering with anticipation as he flung the door wide and strode in.

A wide step inside, the door closed, but his hand still on the iron latch, Ernest paused as abruptly as if hit with a sandbag. As he had surmised, supper was on. Furthermore, it was such a supper as his imagination had painted, or even better.

Fried pork scraps in cream gravy, mealy

boiled potatoes, soda biscuits and white honey, strong tea, a newly baked custard pie, a four-egg one, yellow as minted gold. But, although his little eyes swept the board, took in at a glance the entire appetizing menu, it was upon none of the savory dishes, nor upon the wife of his bosom that his gaze lingered.

His sight was confounded by the presence, at one end of the table, of a fat, complacent, smirking stranger, who seemed very much at home, and whose knife blade was at this very instant skillfully freighted with a cargo of pork scraps and thick cream.

His were not the only eyes so engaged. He observed, without actually looking at her, that the hired girl, Jennie, was also devouring the strange man with her watery blue eyes.

Jennie looked neater than usual. Her hair was orderly, and an almost unstained blue ribbon fillet bound her receding forehead. She was a good and faithful servant, but curiously breakable.

Large and shapeless, her bones were brittle. She had at one time or another broken her collar bone on both sides, cracked a rib, and sprained one wrist and both ankles. Two of her very large and prominent front teeth were broken. She even had broken arches. The verdict of all who knew Jennie at all well was, that she was a good girl, but "not quite all there."

Her parents had been first cousins, which was all right so far as that went, but neither of them had been quite up to the mark mentally. To-night, however, she gave proof that she was at least entirely feminine. The glances that she bestowed upon the guest were coquettish and solicitous.

Twice she had insisted upon dropping into his cup of tea an extra lump of sugar, which George Bangs did not want, but which he was too good natured to refuse. Now, together with the master of the house, she was fairly devouring him with her eyes. But their expression was quite different.

Ernest Sproul cleared his throat irritably. He did not like company very well, and he didn't like strangers at all. The man who was feasting so complacently at his board awoke no response in his soul, save an instinctive dislike.

He wrenched his eyes from his fat face, and turned inquiringly and frowningly to his wife, who was also dressed up a little more than usual, and was wearing the cameo brooch that had belonged to her mother.

Ellen smiled sweetly. She almost cooed as she addressed her husband.

"So you've come, Ernest! I waited supper long as I durst. I wanted you should set down with us to-night."

Ernest grunted, and, without going to the sink to wash up, advanced almost truculently toward his chair. His eyes vibrated between Ellen and the stranger, who in no way abashed was reaching out to slice off a fresh supply of butter for his hot biscuit.

Just as Ernest was about to slump into his chair, Ellen spoke again: "This is my husband, Mr. Sproul, Willie! Shake hands, do. I want you should be the best of friends."

Ernest glowered. He did not offer his hand, but thrust out an inadequate chin in the direction of the beaming stranger.

"And who in tarnation *is* Willie?" he demanded.

Mrs. Sproul tittered nervously. "Why, of course! You'd naturally be surprised as could be. This is my dear, long-lost brother, Will Miller."

Then, indeed, Ernest's eyes bulged, his jaw dropped.

"But—why—he's *dead!*" he exploded.

George's wide mouth opened in a generous grin.

"Do I look dead?" he demanded. He pushed back his chair, rose and extended a hand toward his brother-in-law.

"Well, well! An' so this is the fairy prince that stole my little Nell's heart! Waked her with a kiss, as the poem says."

Which was far, far from the truth. Of romance, there had never been any between Sproul and his wife. Their relations were more like those of an easy-going landlady and an imprudent lodger.

Ernest scowled, and it was evident that Ellen was far from pleased at being termed "my little Nell" by the man for whose presence she was responsible. Of those present, only the hired girl, Jennie, seemed wholly unconscious of any undercurrents. She grinned fatuously.

"My, don't he talk jest grand?" she crooned. "Like it goes in books," And, mincing across to George's place, she would have dropped yet another lump of sugar in his teacup had he not hastily forestalled her by placing his left hand over it.

The right hand meanwhile had been reluctantly accepted by the dazed Ernest. There was no warmth in his clasp, but George more than made up for this, pumping his arm up and down with the utmost cordiality.

"Seems wonderful to find both sister and brother," he sighed gustily. "I can see we're gonna be good shipmates! Grand times we'll have together winter evenin's, poppin' corn and drinkin' our mugs of cider, and spinnin' yarns."

"He reseated himself, and Ernest collapsed sulkily into his chair and began viciously tucking his napkin under his collar.

A diversion was caused at this moment by the entrance of the hired man, Jake Lumis. He was a little, scared looking old chap, with a short beard, which seemed to grow in all directions.

His weak chin was a maze of cowlicks, and his longish hair fell over the collar of his flannel shirt. He crossed the kitchen with only a flicker of his eyes toward the table, toward a tin basin of water standing on the sink shelf, where he washed his hands, passed them through his hair, wiped on a roller towel and seated himself at the table.

In the Sproul household the ancient traditions held. The hired help ate with the family; except that so long as she was needed to serve, Jennie moved between stove and table. Now, with the arrival of Jake, she set out some more potatoes, filled the hired man's cup, and seated herself.

The family circle was complete; and for a brief spell only the tinkle of tableware against crockery, the action of strong teeth, disturbed the silence.

Ernest, having swallowed half of his plateful of pork scraps and potato in an absent-minded way far from his usual zest, was the first to break the silence.

"How'd you come to know him?" he asked, his eyes on Ellen's.

Her brows lifted slightly. "Know him? Know my own brother? As if a body doesn't always know her own kin!"

Ernest grunted. "Let's see; how long is it since he skedaddled? Matter of thirty year, huh? Reckon he must of changed considerable since you see him. Folks that recall him have told me he was quite a good lookin' young feller!"

George laid down his knife and glared balefully at his brother-in-law by adoption.

"Wot's the matter of my looks now?" he asked. "And wot's a miserable little half portion like you got to say about looks, anyhow?"

Quite surprisingly the hired man, who had not opened his mouth up to this time except for the normal business of taking in victuals, broke out into a startling "Haw, haw!"

Ernest glared at him, then at George. "After all," he remarked, not without a certain dignity, "let it be remembered that I am the head of this family!"

But George refused to be impressed. "I'd say you was the tail—and that tail's liable to get itself twisted if my temper's roused!"

"Now, William," soothed his sister, "let this first family meal together be an occasion of peace. This is a happy day for me, and I don't want it spoiled."

"Aw right," agreed her brother. "Speakin' of peace, gimme another piece of that there custard pie."

Jennie eagerly replenished his plate, and without further wrangling, or indeed with talk of any sort, the supper was finished and chairs pushed back.

A fire blazed on the hearth of the sitting room, and Ernest, Ellen, and George betook themselves thither, leaving the hired man and Jennie to do up the dishes in the kitchen. A solemnly ticking grandfather's clock announced the hour of eight; before the fire dozed an enormous tiger-striped cat.

It was a peaceful and homy room in which the pseudo William found himself, and he settled into a Windsor rocker with a sigh of content and began filling his pipe. Between him and Ernest sat Ellen, some mending in her lap.

For a time no sound could be heard save the crackle of the logs, the subdued gossip of Jake and Jennie from the kitchen, the purring of the great cat, and the squeaking of William's rocker. Then Ernest cleared his throat vigorously.

"You aiming to spend a day or so with us?" he asked.

Before the visitor could reply, Ellen spoke up. "I should hope, after an absence of thirty years, that Willie would do better by us than that! I aim to have him winter here, if he'll agree."

Her brother stretched comfortably and yawned.

"I sort of feel I'm gonna like it here," he agreed. "Seems good to get home again, arter years at sea. Nothing like the old home port, hey, Ernie?"

Ernest frowned. "You're a sailorman, then?"

"Nope. Mate on a five-master was my last ticket. Been all over the world and back agin."

"Why didn't you ever write Ellen, in all these years?"

"He's explained that," Mrs. Sproul interrupted gently. "He did write a number of times, but his letters went astray. And he never was much of a hand to correspond. So time flew by faster than what he realized."

"What took you to come here so sudden?" persisted Ernest.

"Why, I dunno as it were sudden, Ernie! Happens I been round t'other side of the world, in the South Seas, carryin' copra, and pearl divin', and such like. I got a chance to fill in as first mate of a tramp that was headed Boston way, and the notion took me to make Ellen a visit. I figured her out as a lone woman, an old maid; didn't know nothing about her good luck in catching you, Ernie."

"And when does your ship sail away again?"

"My ship? I got no regular berth. That tramp I come up on, she's already cleared. I jest shipped for the run to Boston. No hurry about looking up another voyage. I can stay on here a spell well as not."

This news did not seem to cheer Ernest

any. "You don't aim to live off your sister while you're ashore, do you?"

"Why not?" countered George. "You do, don't you?"

Sproul flushed angrily. "No sech a thing! We're man and wife. What belongs to one belongs to t'other."

George puffed for a moment on his pipe.

"Well, they say round here that Ellen pays the taxes and everything. Which is all right, because the farm belongs to her— to her and me," he qualified.

"Ho! So that's how the land lies? You come home to claim your share, after stayin' away thirty years and leavin' her to bear all the expenses!"

"Of course Willie shares equally with me," Ellen spoke up. "Father always intended it so, if he ever came home. The will was made that way."

"Besides which," the seafaring brother added, "fur as money goes, I got plenty of that salted away. Nuggets of gold and pearls and emeralds and rubies, and plain money. Where I been, down in the South Pacific, there's riches lyin' about waiting to be picked up. The natives don't care for nothing but plenty to eat and a sunny spot by the water, and a roof to cover 'em in the rainy season."

Sproul rose abruptly. He glanced at the clock, and, taking his watch from its pocket, began winding it.

"We turn in early here," he said. "Early to bed, and early to rise. It is my custom to read a chapter from Holy Writ each night before retiring."

He crossed over to where, on a small table, reposed a very large and ornate Bible. Opening it at random, and turning the gilt-edged leaves back and forth, he finally decided upon a chapter from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, adjusted a pair of spectacles on his nose, and seated himself beside the kerosene lamp.

During the reading the hired man came in from the kitchen with Jennie. Ellen laid aside her mending, and George took his pipe from his mouth and closed his eyes.

Sproul read in a hollow, sepulchral tone of voice, fitting to the complaints of the much harassed Jeremiah. At the conclu-

sion of the chapter he snapped the covers together with a bang, and everybody said "Amen" in unison. Everybody but George, who was taken unaware. Therefore he spoke up and added his own amen after the rest.

Sprout stamped upstairs to bed, his good night being a mere grunt. The hired man followed him. Jennie, who slept in an L off the kitchen, took her departure. And then George found himself alone with Ellen.

"How's tricks?" he whispered, smiling ingratiatingly.

She looked cautiously up the stairs, then stole to his side. "I guess he ain't suspicious. But you ain't *mean*. You jest *think* you are. He isn't going to mind you at all, once he gets used to seeing you around."

"Is that so?" George indignantly muttered. "You just wait till I begin to work on him! Didn't expect me to start nothing the very first night, before we was acquainted, did ye?"

She shook her head, her eyes fixed quizzically on his, a curious and stealthy sort of mirth smoldering in their depths. Then she turned and from a shelf took a small kerosene lamp, which she lighted and handed to him.

"I showed you where your room is. Can you find it by yourself? Second flight up, right at the head of the stairs. The chimney goes up through it, and you'll find it warm. There's an extra quilt over the foot of the bed."

George nodded, took the lamp. "Sure; I know my way. G' night."

His room was large and square, with two small-paned windows looking over the back yard, now flooded with a cold white moon. Presently, having undressed, he clambered into the enormous four-poster, pulling up about his chin the thick quilt with its log-cabin pattern.

He meant to review the events of the day; plan out his campaign for the morrow. But the hearty supper, the hot open fireplace, the excitement of the past twelve hours, were too much for him. Barely five minutes after his head had sunk into the feather pillow he was sound asleep. The

next thing he knew, some one was knocking at his door.

"Breakfast ready in five minutes, Mr. Willie!"

It was Jennie calling him.

V.

THAT day, and those immediately following, were a trifle confusing to George Bangs. He was no fool; he possessed a considerable degree of cunning of a low order, and especially an ability to shift for himself without really doing any hard work.

But his intellect was by no means notable. Suddenly and extraordinarily he found himself thrust into a life for which he had had no training whatever.

No longer was it necessary for him to resort to all sorts of devices to obtain the three meals and a bed which, together with some smoking tobacco and an occasional haircut, about comprised his physical needs. In one sense, he was living in clover.

Not only was he getting more and better food than he had ever eaten in his life, and sleeping in as good a bed as the President of his country could boast, without the slightest worry as to obtaining the wherewithal to pay for it, but he was actually receiving all this and fifteen dollars a week for doing what he preferred above everything else! All he had to do was to be his own mean self—and how often had he not felicitated himself on being the meanest man alive?

Yet, now that all this was within his grasp, a strange paralysis seemed to have seized upon him.

For the first time, he began to harbor secret doubts as to his own innate meanness; and, with these doubts, terror possessed his soul. He was like the strong man who finds himself suddenly deserted by his muscles; like the adroit lawyer who at the most inopportune moment perceives that his memory of precedents has failed; or like a fortunate gambler who for the first time finds that his luck has left him, his hunches petered out.

He knew that Mrs. Sprout was more than

skeptical of his genuine meanness, and he realized that so far his efforts had failed to do more than mildly and quite temporarily irritate the morose Ernest. It was plain that nothing short of a high explosive would detonate him away from a place where he was so fatly comfortable.

But if George's own life was radically changed, so was that of practically everybody with whom he came in contact. Within three days of his arrival it seemed as if every able-bodied man, woman, and child had contrived an excuse to call at the old Miller homestead.

All were curious to get a sight of the runaway brother, so strangely returned after three decades. If possible, they wanted to talk with him; if not, then at least to talk about him.

Of the callers, only a very few were in any sense dangerous. There were not over half a dozen who had ever beheld William Miller in the flesh.

The boys and girls with whom he had played and gone to school had moved away from the village as soon as they were able to get a position out of town. The farms everywhere were being deserted by the younger generation.

There were two very old women, and three men, who could dimly recall the handsome, vivacious younger brother of their fellow townswoman, Ellen. These all called as soon as the news came to them. Without a dissenting voice they expressed their sorrow and sense of shock that such a fine boy should have deteriorated into a fat, pasty, shifty-eyed and utterly unpossessing lout. Their opinions, overheard or repeated to George, naturally irritated him.

And when one of the old men, with whose children he had, so he was informed, been an especially cherished playmate, became querulous at his inability to recall any of them, or the little pranks they had played, or even the name of the school-teacher who had walloped William with a leather belt, buckle end foremost, the stranger himself flared up and asked how in Tophet he, who had circumnavigated the world nineteen times, and sailed more than two hundred thousand miles in every sort

of a vessel from a catamaran to a liner, could be expected to recall such nonsense as the names of children he had played around with?

"And as for being beat up with a belt strap, ain't I been knocked cold with war clubs, stuck full of spears, shot with 'most everything from birdshot to steel-jacketed bullets? I sure have, and that ain't maybe!"

The old man had betaken himself off, muttering. He later confided to his cronies that, in his best belief, this man was an impostor; but nobody paid any attention to him. His memory had been failing for years; he could be relied upon for nothing that had taken place within the past two decades, though, as is often the case, he was amazingly accurate in all sorts of trifling events that had happened in his youth.

In general, George was accepted without question. It stood to reason that Ellen would not be deceived in such a matter. And above all, Ernest had resigned himself to the story his wife had told him. That was the main thing, after all.

Ellen herself was changed, because this was her first real lie, and its very proportions subdued and almost stunned her. A sober, truthful, and reliable woman, she now found herself living day by day a colossal untruth.

It was inevitable that she should appear distraught, absent-minded, worried. Ernest regarded it as a proof that she was secretly sorry that William had turned up; and this encouraged him to hope and believe that means would be found of getting him to shorten his stay.

Jake, the hired man, was less concerned than anybody else. A man of little or no imagination, and no ambitions, his life went on much as before. He was contented in the same way that a house dog is when things are going well enough and there are plenty of bones, not too many fleas, and a few pats on the head.

Still, even Jake responded in his own inarticulate way to the changed conditions. Somewhere in his soul, buried fathoms deep beneath layers of ignorance and disuse and unremitting toil, must have flickered an

almost extinct love of adventure; and this was fanned feebly by the wild stories William, the roving brother, delighted to spin on any and all occasions.

He listened silently for the most part, misunderstood most of what he heard, but gloated lethargically upon the rest. While at work alone in the stable, or cutting wood in the timber lot, he pondered on the incredible happenings, the outrageous countries, their queer denizens. It brought a little excitement into his drab life.

But the most noteworthy change was in Jennie, the hired girl. More and more she fell beneath the infatuation William had from the first inspired.

To her, he was the infallible scholar, adventurer, explorer, hero. She was forever slipping dainties into his hand—a fresh gingerbread cookie, some doughnuts hot from the fat, a quarter of a sponge cake, a glass of milk that was half cream. She spent twenty minutes making his bed, although he could do it perfectly well in four.

She almost wore out the straw matting on the floor of his room with her broom, although it might have been thick enough with dust to leave foot tracks and he would never have noticed. She hung on his words as if he were a prophet.

Most amazing of all was the change in her appearance. She wasn't such a bad-looking creature, had she not been so sloppy. Young enough, quite a stretch from thirty as yet, good complexion, and very sturdy save for her curious tendency to break here and there in her bones.

Suddenly she began to smarten up in her dress. She was very capable with her hands, both as a cook and seamstress. She discarded several old and outlandish garments, tore up three dresses and from the fragments managed to make a new one; bought a pattern from the general store and began to cut it out with no little skill; sewed missing buttons onto her shoes, no longer went about with skipped stitches in her stockings.

Her most surprising act was to take a day off, go up to Derry by bus, and there have a dentist replace her two broken front teeth with pivoted ones, one of them a solid

gold affair. And while she was in Derry she also had her hair bobbed.

When she now appeared on the street of her native village, at first nobody knew her, under a brand-new cloche hat and with her glittering smile and the set of her shoulders. When she was recognized, a number of worthy middle-aged bachelors began shining up to her in a half sheepish way. But Jennie was a one-man girl. Her heart was in the keeping of George Bangs, the meanest of men in his own proud estimation.

To all these changes George was rather oblivious. He settled down to the easy life so different from anything he had been accustomed to. With grace he accepted the bountiful table, the clean sheets, and warm fire, his easy rocker, the lazy hours dozing in the sun, his pipe full of good tobacco.

Yet underneath always lay the recognition that he was not living up to his bargain; that he was not being especially mean to Ernest Sproul, certainly not mean enough to induce him to leave his own comfortable home.

It is not to be supposed that George made no efforts; from time to time he thought of something to do, and promptly did it.

There was, for instance that first—and only—night when Sproul suggested that brother William take his turn and read the chapter from Holy Writ. This was done in a spirit of malice. Ernest suspected that his new brother-in-law was a poor reader, whereas he himself read rather well, if sepulchrally. He wanted to show him up.

But George Bangs, having had experience as a "mission stiff," had more than a passing acquaintance with the Bible. More than once he had been obliged to await his supper until long portions of it had been read; he had learned the trick of keeping his soup warm at such times by covering it with a hand.

He had even been obliged to take his turn at reading; and if he read haltingly, and mispronounced many words, he made up for this by a familiarity with some of the more bizarre portions. Now he willingly took the big gilt-edged book, and after some search found the ninth chapter of

Genesis, and, passing a large and not over-clean thumb down the column, began reading aloud from the twentieth verse:

"And Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: And he drank of the wine, and was drunken—"

And so on, through the melancholy story of the great navigator's fall from respectability. He was aware, during the recital, of something electric in the atmosphere of the living room.

Ellen sat very erect in her chair, punctuating the reading with dry, sharp sniffs. Her husband's eyes smoldered, and dull red spots glowed on his thin cheeks and forehead.

Even Jake's dull intelligence was roused by something more piquant than he had ever realized the Bible contained. Only Jennie listened placidly, her admiring eyes fixed on George.

When he had finished, closing the book with a bang, Sproul spoke up.

"You ought to be ashamed to read a thing like that right out loud before decent folks!" he declared.

George blinked innocently. "Well, it's all there, in the Bible, ain't it? Mean to say you're good enough to be criticizin' the Good Book?"

"He means," Ellen spoke gently, "that you might have chosen something less unpleasant."

"Huh! When you read the Bible, you pick out all the sweet, pretty parts, about the promises, and forgiveness, and streets of pure gold, and the like of that? Who are you to say what parts of the Bible is good, and what ain't?"

"Shows what a terrible curse strong drink is," added Ernest, who suspected that brother William had downed his share.

"Nothing of the sort!" argued George. "Here was Noah; the only head of a household in the whole world that God considered worth savin' from the flood. All the rest was drownded, and a good rideance. And this Noah, the best man in millions, thought no harm in doin' a little home-brewing on his own. No more was there any harm, either!"

"No harm? Don't it tell, just as you read, how his own son reviled him?"

"Yeah; and after that don't it show how Noah bawled him out? Him and his son, Canaan? 'Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.' I guess that shows where his son got off!"

George seemed to have rather the better of the argument; but he had no further opportunity to read aloud to the family circle. And it seemed to him that this well intended effort to be mean had antagonized Ellen Sproul fully as much as it had her husband.

He was sorry for this; he liked Ellen, and he could recall no man he disliked as heartily as he did Ernest. No one to whom he would sooner be his meanest self.

Observing that Sproul was not given to familiarities, or to enduring them from others, he began to assume an air of jovial camaraderie; to clap him heartily on the back, poke him in the ribs while telling him some broad jest; borrowing and smoking his pipe, trying—but without success—to borrow small sums of money from him.

This maddened Sproul, until he all but foamed at his thin mouth; but it by no means drove him from home. Instead, it spurred him to drive the newcomer away.

The feeling that he was a decided flop in his efforts, caused a shiver of apprehension in George's nerves. Winter was advancing; the thought of being turned out to shift for himself was unendurable.

For the first time in his life he began to harbor miserable thoughts. Hitherto he had been a free spender, a man of generous impulses. Whenever he had a half dollar in his pocket he was ready to share it with the first crony he happened across. Nickels and dimes had slipped through his fingers uncounted.

Now, against the day when Mrs. Sproul might sadly inform him that he was a failure as a mean man, and bid him Godspeed, he began to lay up as much of his salary as possible. And inasmuch as there was no temptation to do more than buy tobacco and an occasional magazine or newspaper, he was able to lay aside nearly all of the fifteen dollars a week.

.But his hoard did not grow fast enough to satisfy him in his new thrift. And so it was that one day, stuttering and embarrassed, his battered hat twirling nervously in his fingers, Jake Lummis sought Mrs. Sproul in the woodshed, and whispered hoarsely to her that brother William had skinned him of all he had. Horror-stricken, she begged him to particularize.

It seemed that William had taught him, Jake, a new and rather fascinating game. Stud poker it was called.

"At fust, we only played fer matches," Jake explained. "And I allers won. Then he suggested that we play for a leetle real money; not much at fust, jest pennies, or mebbe nickels. And still I won. I won as much as a dollar and eleven cents in one day. So then we made the stakes bigger, so's to give him a chance to get his'n back; and seein' I was way ahead, course I was willin'. Even then, I still won most of the times. But by and by his luck seemed to turn, sort of; and then, course it was me wanted to win back what I'd lost. End of it wuz, I drawed out all the money I got in the bank. More'n eighty dollars. And 'fore I realized it, he'd won every durn cent! And now I ain't got nothin' to show for all these years of work."

It was an indignant old lady who faced George Bangs with these damning facts. Somewhat to her surprise, he did not deny them. He did not even seem to feel a proper sense of shame. And when she insisted that he make immediate and full restitution, he fought doggedly to retain a small amount, to pay for his time and trouble.

"No reason I should spend hours and hours amusin' that old fool! My time's worth something, ain't it? Besides, if he gets it all back, it won't be a lesson to him! The very next feller comes along Jake will lose his last pants button to. Better for him if it does cost him a little, for an example!"

Finally, Ellen agreed that he was to retain ten dollars, in order that Jake might never again be tempted to sinful gambling.

"But the very next trick of this sort I catch you at, out you go! I'm done with you. The very idea! I hire you and pay you good wages, and feed you best I know

how, with the understanding you're to be mean to Ernest! 'Stead of which, you trim poor old Jake, who ain't more'n half bright anyhow."

George felt hurt over this rebuke. After all, he argued to himself, he held the whip-hand. Mrs. Sproul wouldn't dare fire him!

If she did, and he told Ernest the truth, how he wasn't her brother Will at all, but just a stranger brought in to make Ernest so wretched that he would be driven from home, where would Ellen be? Life wouldn't be worth living, if he knew Ernest Sproul! More likely than not, it would be she who would be driven from home!

Not that he contemplated such treachery. But she better be careful whom she threatened! She'd hired him on the strength of his meanness; but he could aim that meanness in one direction as well as another.

Nevertheless, he behaved very well for the next few days. Twice he awakened Ernest from the afternoon nap he liked to take on the haircloth sofa.

"Tell me a nice story from the Bible; do, Ernie!" he begged. "I'm a pore, sinful feller, and you are so good."

He followed him about like a faithful dog, used his clean collars, borrowed his tobacco, pocket knife, anything portable.

By another week he had Ernest at the stage where he would gladly have murdered him, if he could have escaped arrest therefor. But so far as he could see, and worse yet, so far as Ellen Sproul could see, the bare thought of leaving his comfortable home had not sprouted in her husband's canny mind.

VI.

MORE and more, as the days wore on, George began to feel at home, and to shiver at the thought of being pried loose and sent back to the soup kitchens, missions, and park benches of his old life. Without a relative in the world, he relished this comfortable household where meals were always ready on time, fuel—which he didn't have to split and saw—was always stacked and waiting, his bed soft and warm.

And little by little he felt his boasted meanness oozing from him; the one talent he needed now more than ever, since with-

out it Mrs. Sproul would have no further use for him.

He was the more ready, then, to accept any suggestion; and when Ellen broached the subject of labor he did not spurn the idea as he ordinarily would have done.

"It's this way," she explained. "Jake is getting old and slow; he can't begin to keep up with the work. The farm begins to look run down. Ernest won't lift a finger, as you know. Jest sits there and dozes and smokes his pipe and reads till I'd think he would scramble what little brains he's got.

"Now if you was to help out a little, not hard work, you understand, but just show a willingness to do your share, it would help old Jake, but above all it would make Ernest uncomfortable! As my brother and half owner of the place, you don't *have* to do a thing; all the more credit when you peel off your coat and help out! I reckon Ernest would feel mighty meaching about it."

It seemed reasonable. And before he knew it George had arrayed himself in overalls and jumper, and was pottering about with Jake. He wasn't much help at first; spoiled more than he helped. But at least he was company for the old hired man, and after the first awkwardness had worn off, he really accomplished a good deal.

He curry-combed the old horse, washed the buggy, split kindling, fetched water, made fires, sifted ashes, took over a dozen little things that enabled Jake to devote himself to the more important farm work. But if Ernest felt any qualms at seeing his brother-in-law acting the part of a man, he concealed it. In fact, he made no reference to it whatever, but pursued his lazy and shiftless mode of life undisturbed.

One important development rose from this industry on George's part. One mild winter day, armed with a billhook, he was thinning out the alders along a wall that bounded what had been a fine mowing lot, until it began to get beyond old Jake, and to grow up to scrub. Seeing him, Jake wandered over and pointed to a bright leaved bush which was still quite green.

"Look out fer that," he warned.

"Why?" asked George, straightening up. "I don't see nothing."

"That's pisen ivy. Touch it and ye'll

all break out in a rash, and itch like all git-out!"

Thereupon George learned for the first time of the noxious weed that all country children are taught to avoid from the time they can toddle alone. He was much interested.

"How do you manage when you have to work in it?"

"Wear gloves, o' course," Jake said.

"How much of it ya got to get on yourself to make it take?"

Jake bit off a piece from a very black plug of tobacco. When he had moistened it into a chewable mass, he explained: "Some folks don't even have to tech it. Seems to pisen 'em if they go anywhere near it. Others, but not many, can handle it and it don't seem to affect 'em. Them it does affect only jest have to touch it with a hand, or bare flesh anywhere, and they break out. May last 'em a week or more. All swell up; I've seen 'em with their eyes plumb shet tight. Sometimes they have to call in a doctor, but there's nothing he can do better'n to keep the skin washed with saleratus water."

Jake returned to where he had been turning cornstalks under the sod, according to the government regulations since the cornborer had appeared in this part of the country. George gazed earnestly at the harmless looking plant for a long time, an idea sprouting in his mind.

It was a couple of mornings later that Ernest Sproul appeared at breakfast looking as if he had spent a long, hard night among the disreputable resorts of a metropolis. His face was red and swollen, one eye being entirely closed, the other a mere slit.

There were ugly blotches on his hands, and it was evident that these itched cruelly, and that only by exercising the utmost self-denial did Ernest control himself from tearing the tender flesh from them in his misery. The rash had even broken out in his scalp, where it showed beneath the thin hair.

"What on earth—" his wife cried as her eyes beheld the startling change. "What's happened to you?"

"I don't know." Ernest spoke with swollen lips. "Woke up in the night as if I was on fire. This morning soon's it was

light I looked in the glass, and it scared me! Mebbe it's smallpox," he added, at which Jennie, who was just then fetching in the scrambled eggs, screeched thinly, and leaned against George Bangs for support.

"Looks to me like poison ivy," Ellen remarked, "though as you never stir outside only to keep to the road, I dunno how you'd get it. I better send Jake to Dr. Roberts, to make sure. If you've got to be took to the pest house, the sooner we know it, the better!"

"You don't seem to take it very hard," Ernest grumbled.

"I don't aim to take it, if it's catching. Jennie, you see that everything Mr. Sproul touches, plates, forks, spoons, and things, is scalded in boiling water. And you tell Jake to run over to the doctor's fast as he can make it, and tell him to come at once. It's serious!"

Dr. Roberts, the only practitioner within five miles, was at liberty, having just breakfasted, but not yet started out on his rounds. He was over within ten minutes; and a very quick examination satisfied him.

"It's poison ivy," he announced. "Don't care if he never did go into the fields; the ivy's come to him, somehow. Anyhow, that's what it is." And he gave such simple directions as were already known perfectly well to Ellen, as to the treatment for the sufferer.

Ernest was a terrible nuisance to his wife, as well as to himself. Her sense of duty forbade her to neglect him; and she was kept busy applying cooling and healing lotions for several days. Her sleep also was much broken. The third day she spoke privately with George.

"Are you responsible for this?" she asked. "I want to know, for my own peace of mind. When Jennie made up Mr. Sproul's bed, she found what looked like a sort of greenish dust scattered on the sheets. We couldn't figure how it come there, but maybe you can tell me?"

George straightened up proudly, his eye lighting.

"Yes, ma'am. It was me thought it up. Jake told me about it, and so I went and put gloves on my hands and gathered me a mess of the leaves, which was pretty hard

and dry, so I could pound 'em up into a sort of powder. And I sneaked up into Ernie's room and scattered the dust where 'twould do the most good, I thought."

Ellen's lips set grimly.

"Well, it's certainly made me a nice job! I haven't had a decent night's sleep since he broke out with the rash. And lucky it didn't take on me, too. There ain't any manner of doubt but what you done was *mean* enough, but how you think it is going to influence Ernest to leave home, is more'n I can see. He don't even know how he got it; and if he did, he'd likely murder you, and be justified. Next plan of the sort you have, you speak to me first. You'll end by driving us *all* away from here."

George felt grieved. He had been proud of this idea, and its success. It was, he felt, one of the high tides of his achievements in meanness; and instead of being praised, Mrs. Sproul was making dirty cracks about it. Showing no appreciation whatever.

The incident reawakened his anxieties. How long before he would be banished from this homelike Eden? In view of which calamity he must save up all the money possible.

He went to his little hoard and counted it over. There was nearly a hundred and fifty dollars now. But that would not last long back in the big city. He must find some way of increasing it. One way came to him a few days thereafter.

The attic of the old Miller place was, like most such areas, a regular museum of past generations. Among much that was worthless save from the sentimental point of view, there were a few really valuable pieces of furniture.

George, to kill time, had wandered about the floor more than once. On one occasion, Ellen had been up there, straightening things, and she had called to his attention sundry articles.

Not having any taste for antiquities, and being, of course, indifferent to the early history of the Millers, George had paid scant attention; but he did happen to recall an old high stool that Ellen had pointed out as having been used by "poor dear

father when he was a baby, too little to sit otherwise at table, and later on it fell to brother Willie." And there the matter was dropped, and would have been forgotten.

But it chanced that one day Ellen was up at the village, the "Four Corners," as it was spoken of by the natives, shopping at the general store, and Ernest was, as usual, half awake and half asleep before the fireplace. There came a knock on the door, and George answered it.

A stranger stood there, his flivver beside the gate.

"Any old antiques, hooked rugs, glass, chairs, four-posters, or what-have-you, lying round the place?" he asked. "I buy and sell 'em."

"Dunno," George answered. "Ellen—my sister—ain't in just now. She's the only one knows anything about that."

A sudden memory knocked at his mind, he looked the man up and down, decided that he was not a cheat, and that he looked prosperous.

"There's one thing, though," he added. "I got an old high chair I used when I was a kid; and so did my old man. And his, before him." He added this to make it sound more impressive.

"Lemme see it," the buyer said.

"All right; I'll fetch it," George agreed.

The purchaser of antiques looked it over inch by inch, and saw that it was a very perfect specimen, and probably about eighty years old. It had a rush bottom, some of the original decorations on the back, gilded apples and pears, against broad leaves—grape, probably—and in no way had it ever been mended or restored.

"Give you fifteen for it," he said briskly.

"Dollars?"

"Sure! What you think, *cents*?"

Three dirty five dollar bills changed hands; the man picked up the little old chair and started back to his car. All would have been well; in any case, Ellen would likely not have missed it for months, if ever.

But unfortunately, at this moment she rounded the turn in the road, saw a stranger who seemed to be carrying something in his arms from her gate, and, knowing that her house was full of untrustworthy men, her own husband, her make-believe

brother, the doddering old Jake, she quickened her step, and arrived just as the man was hoisting the chair aboard his car.

"What's that? What you got there?" she panted.

The man turned leisurely, surveyed her with a slow smile.

"Why, I just bought this high chair, ma'am. You live here? Well, your brother sold me the chair he used to sit in at his meals. Fifteen dollars I give him for it."

Ellen glared at him, and then at George. "You take that chair right out, this minute! It belongs to me! He's no right to sell a thing from this house."

The man did not seem to be disturbed. He leaned easily against his car, surveyed the angry woman with tolerant eyes. "Well, he says it was his own chair, ma'am. You're his sister, ain't you?"

Ellen hesitated, feeling herself caught.

"Yes, I am!" she snapped. "But this farm and house and all it contains was left to me by my father, in his will. And so that chair is mine, too!"

"You said you and me was joint owners of the place and all father left." George spoke in an injured voice.

Ellen glared anew at him, and her hands trembled. "I'll have the law on you both if you don't hand over that chair right now!"

The buyer was still tranquil. Years of adventures with owners of antiques, real and faked, had given him poise.

"Well, under the circumstances, and not wantin' to create any ill feelings between brother and sister, you can have it back—at a fair profit for my time and trouble. I aim to double when I sell anything. If I pay fifteen, I ask thirty. But I won't haggle with you, ma'am. Give me twenty, and the chair returns to the house. That is only five dollars, hardly enough to pay for the trouble driving 'way out to this God-forsaken place."

In the end Ellen handed over the twenty dollars, and the man drove off, but she had no little trouble making George disgorge the fifteen he had received. He was sulky, almost arrogant about it.

That night, after she had bathed Ernest's inflamed face and hands, and seen him to

bed, she sat alone by the fireplace, and angrily decided on the best way to rid herself of George Bangs.

She knew that it would not be too easy to do this. He would be certain to tell Ernest the story, and that would make her life more unendurable than ever.

But she had the feeling that now was as good a time as any. Broken out as he was with a painful rash, Ernest was in no condition to quarrel; was, in fact, dependent upon her ministrations. If the thing was to be done, it had better be done now!

She was alone, because George had gone to prayer meeting with Jennie. This may surprise those who think they know George; it would have amazed most of his old cronies. But there wasn't another thing to do in Miller's Creek.

Not a picture house, nor even a bowling alley. Most of the young people had migrated; there were no barn dances, no straw rides. Town meeting, election days, and prayer meeting; these comprised the village's social resources.

George went because Jennie asked him to. He was indifferent himself.

Without realizing it, he had grown to feel comfortable in Jennie's company. She never nagged him. He received from her a wealth of devotion and admiration. She respected his judgment, regarded him as a perfect physical specimen, housing a mighty intellect. This was very soothing to one whose good qualities had never before received much recognition.

It was pleasant to walk along under the brilliant moon, with the sharp, dry bark of foxes sounding afar, and nearer at hand the mellow bell of the old meeting house. Inside there would be a few people only, mostly old.

They would sing and pray and repeat paragraphs from the Bible; and George, if he could think of some verse that would shock them all, would also rise in his pew and recite it. Otherwise he would doze, and after the meeting would shake hands with the minister and be called "brother," and then, back at the house, there would be a quarter of a mince pie waiting, and a glass of rich milk to wash it down; and Jennie would sit watching him eat, and try-

ing to think up something to make him happy. This was the life!

Ernest's rash cleared up, and still Ellen had not been able to make up her mind to thrust George into outer darkness. Strangely enough, for she could give herself no good reason, she sort of liked him.

She was shrewd enough to recognize his general worthlessness, but also she felt instinctively that there was no inherent evil in him. He was a bad little boy, undisciplined and spoiled, living in the body of a flabby man. Not so flabby, at that. Not as compared to him on his arrival.

He was fully as heavy, but the food he had been eating was wholesome and nourishing, and he had hardened. Once accustomed to help old Jake, he had grown to enjoy the exercise. He found that he could eat more, gave him an appetite. So, he shoveled snow, fed the chickens, sometimes helped Jennie wring clothes and mop floors.

His presence no longer roused any comment. The village had forgotten him; accepted him as part of the local scenery. Even Ernest seemed indifferent to his presence.

Jake liked him, and harbored no resentment at memories of poker losses. Jennie, Ellen thought, would probably go into a tantrum were he to be ousted; might even leave, herself! It looked as if she, Ellen Sproul, had saddled herself with another man, as useless as her husband, though less disagreeable.

There were long winter nights when George regaled them with imaginary adventures in far countries. In order to bear out his claim of having run away to sea, and thereafter spent his life upon the salt water, it was necessary for him to tell some lies, and this proved so congenial a task, that as he improved with practice, he almost convinced himself that he was a rough Don Juan and Marco Polo in one.

The South Sea Islands; there he was at his best.

"You'd like it there, Ernie," he remarked after supper, while the family were sitting about the hearth. "At fust, you have to git used to the natives not wearin' any clothes. But arter a little, you don't think nothing of it at all."

"That is because they are blacks," Ernest commented. "And a white man sort of shrinks from 'em, anyhow."

George shook his head slowly.

"Nope; they ain't blacks," he said. "Course, they ain't exactly white; but neither would you be, living there under a tropic sun. Fact is, white men look blacker than what the natives do. And figgers! Men *and* women. Be-autiful! Like-like—" he paused, seeking for a comparison. "Like the front row in a revue. And color of maple fudge candy, like what Jennie here makes."

"Tee-hee!" tittered Jennie. "You make love to them nice fudge ladies, Willie?"

George sighed. "Oh, well! You know what men be. And out there, thousands of miles from home—besides, they're the most lovin' creatures you ever see! Ernie, what'd you do if a passel of them brown girls, not one of 'em over twenty, was to swim out to meet your ship, and clamber aboard her, and throw their arms about you and hug and kiss and pet you, and you just arter making a voyage of mebbe ten thousand miles without passing the time o' day with any woman whatsoever?"

"I'd push 'em back overboard again!" growled Ernest Sproul. "It ain't moral, conditions out there. What are the missionaries trying to do about it?"

George chuckled to himself, turned then to Ellen: "He'd push 'em overboard, says Ernie! Well, mebbe. But I'll bet he wouldn't push very hard! What do you think, sister?"

"I think," Ellen said primly, "that it would be much more suitable if you was to tell us about the trees, and flowers, and fish that live in them islands."

"Well, every one to his own taste. Me, I like fish, at times. And speakin' of flowers; these girls wear wreaths and chains of 'em about their necks: jasmine, and hibiscus, and other kinds. And they hang 'em around your neck, too. Ernie here was asking how about the missionaries. Well, they do their best, poor fellers! They manage to git these girls into Mother Hubbards, and spoil their looks that way; and some of 'em marries the native girls and lives just like they do, and forgets they

ever was missionaries. But speaking generally, when the missionaries come, the island is spoiled. Soon as the natives begin to wear clothes, they git immoral!"

"You mean to set there and tell me that wearing clothes leads to immorality?" Ernest demanded.

"Not exactly; but only that clothes and morality got nothing in common, specially. Why, take this here village. If every man, woman and child was to take to goin' around without any clothes, for the first few days it would attract a lot of attention; but inside a week, nobody'd even think of it! Matter o' habit."

George closed his eyes, waved his lighted pipe.

"How plain it all comes back to me! Settin' on some golden shore, warm as new milk in the clean sand, with palms wavin' overhead, and the ocean breakin' in foam at our feet, with mebbe twenty or thirty pretty little girls, each of 'em wearin' for evening clothes, a posy stuck behind each ear, and with everybody holding his gourd full of cocoanut wine, sippin' of it between kisses, and joinin' in to sing the sweet, sad songs them islanders do sing, it makes me—"

Just what it made George, was not disclosed. Ellen Sproul rose, a light in her eyes brighter than the reflection of the charring logs on the hearth cast in them.

"I think a man ought to keep such mem'ries to himself," she remarked. "And the less he even thinks of 'em, the better for him! Come, Ernest. You mustn't get your blood heated up; your rash ain't fully healed yet."

Ernest rose, a little reluctantly. From the other end of the fireplace came a bary-tone snore. Old Jake had fallen asleep. Jennie and George were left alone before the dying embers, and between the sleeping hired man, and family cat.

Jennie sighed gustily, edged closer. She put out a red roughened hand and covered one of his. George smiled fatuously, returned her pressure.

"Willie," she whispered, "them girls prettier than what I be? Huh?"

"Not a mite," he agreed; which he was the readier to do because the only South

Sea Islander he had ever seen was in a circus. "And they couldn't cook nowhere near like you can, neither!"

Jennie rested her head on his shoulder. Her hair smelled powerfully of pennyroyal, which she used as a shampoo. George turned and looked down into her blue, slightly goggling eyes.

"You love Jennie," she murmured.

"I—I guess so," gasped George. "I never was in love, so I dunno how it feels. But anyhow I like you better'n any girl I ever see! And nobody livin' can make buckwheat cakes like what you do!"

VII.

THAT night Ellen Sproul lay awake for a long time. The time had come, she knew, to get rid of George Bangs.

As a mean man, he was a total loss. He had merged easily into the family circle, was a dead weight, and an expense. Even Ernest had ceased to complain about him.

Once in awhile, he hinted that the grocery bills had mounted surprisingly, and that if her brother was so prosperous, it might be a good idea to suggest to him that he bear his share of them. But aside from that, he did not seem to be irritated by his presence.

Once gone, there would be an explanation. George would give her away; and Ernest would know that she had made an attempt to get rid of him, and that she had failed. Thereafter, he would be a real tyrant.

Furthermore, he would have the sympathy of all the villagers when he told them, as he would certainly do. And what would they think of her, Ellen? A pious, truthful, honest woman, who had gone out into the highways and byways and advertised for a strange man to come and pose as her lost brother William, and whom she had paid to carry out this deception?

Nevertheless, of two evils, she chose what seemed the lesser. George should be paid in full, discharged. Come what might, she would not have him around the house any more.

He made a good deal of extra work; and now that her stratagem had proved a failure, his presence irritated her and was

a cause of self-reproach. The very next morning, as soon as breakfast was done, she would get the disagreeable business over with.

But next morning held for her its own surprise. Before breakfast was over, Jennie called her out of the kitchen, making mysterious motions with her red hands; and once there, with the door cautiously shut, standing in the far corner of the sitting room, she grinned fatuously, her gold tooth glistening in the winter sun that stole through the window.

"Miss Ellen, I'm gonna get married to Willie!" she giggled. "He ast me last night arter you'd gone to bed. He's goin' to go up to Boston and buy me a ring this very day!"

Mrs. Sproul was stricken speechless for the moment. What new complications did this entail?

It would do no good to tell Jennie that her man was not what he seemed to be; that instead of being William Miller, he was George Bangs, a bum, and a derelict. Jennie wouldn't care; she hadn't mind enough to sense George's deceit.

Besides, was she not equally deceitful, or even more so, since it was Ellen herself who had tempted him? And now, if she were to turn George away, that would mean the loss of Jennie; and hired help was hard to get these days, and very expensive when secured from an agency.

Jennie was a part of her life: she ran the house like a clock, did her simple tasks well, was never sulky or obstreperous, was in fact a part of the household as much as the furniture, or the hearth, or the big elm that in summer shaded the roof.

Ellen swallowed once or twice. She tried to smile. "Why, that's nice for you, Jennie, if—that is, when you get to know him well enough to be *sure*!"

Jennie grinned. "Oh, I know him well enough! Me and him, we love each other. We're going to git married right away. This week, maybe."

"And then go away on a honeymoon?"

Jennie shook her head. "No; we ruther save our money. I got some, and so has Willie. But I'd marry him if he didn't have a cent. We'll just live here, and I'll

do the work same as always, and he will work, too. You're glad, ain't you?"

"I'll have to think it over," Ellen decided. "It is so sudden! I never thought of you as a marrying kind."

"I wasn't," Jennie said simply. "Not till I seen Willie! Oh, Miss Ellen! Ain't he jest *grand*?"

Bewildered and troubled, Ellen went back to the kitchen to finish her breakfast. Her worried gaze sought the eyes of George, only to receive a solemn wink.

The lazy bum! Enticing the poor, simple Jennie into matrimony, a state her intellect unfitted her for; and all for the sake of making his position here secure!

Likely enough, were he allowed to stay with her, he would behave well enough. Give him all he wanted to eat, and he was satisfied. Though, reluctantly, she had to admit that lately he had really done quite a little work about the place.

Anyhow, were she to turn him out bag and baggage, he would run away and desert Jennie. Break the poor, simple thing's heart! Did ever a woman find herself in such a position before?

She was dusting the front parlor, her mind still occupied with this new complication, when the loud honk of an automobile attracted her attention. Peering through the window, she saw a rather worn but yet imposing and expensive touring car standing before the gate.

From it a stocky figure was emerging, pausing to speak to a pretty and smartly dressed girl who sat beside the wheel.

The man turned, and began to make his way toward the house, his tanned face eagerly scanning the yard, the old elm tree, the brass knocker on the heavy front door.

Ellen Sproul's jaw dropped. So did her duster. She ran to the door with the swiftness of a young woman, threw it open, and herself into the strong arms of the man who stood wiping his stout boots against the worn iron scraper clamped to the grindstone.

"Willie! My brother Willie!"

For the first time in her life, Ellen Sproul suffered an attack of hysteria. Weeping and laughing together, nose, eyes, and tongue all running, she clung frantically to

his coat, her gray head buried in one shoulder.

Moisture gathered in the steady blue eyes of the man himself. He was a fine-looking chap, with iron gray hair, a man of a possible forty odd, who might be a few years older, or younger.

He patted her thin back; and when she raised her face, he cupped it in his two thick hands and kissed her on her brow, her mouth, her chin.

"My poor little sister Nell!" he murmured, over and over.

After awhile, she calmed down. Her eyes turned toward the car, and the smiling girl within it, a young woman of some twenty-seven or eight, she thought.

The man waved a hand. "Come on in, Annie! Introduce you to the old homestead!"

The girl climbed out, and came up the walk, and was introduced.

"My wife, Nell! This is Annie Miller, the latest addition to the family. Been courtin' her for four, five years, off and on; but only just got spliced. She's a Californian. Met her when one of my vessels put into Frisco. We're on our honeymoon."

The women shook hands, and after an instant's hesitation, kissed each other.

"Come in," Ellen said; and threw wide the door.

In the hall, a saturnine figure, Ernest Sproul, stood waiting. It was plain that he had seen and heard everything. A sneer creased his thin lips.

"Another brother Will, huh? Ain't customary to call more'n one boy in a family by the same name, is it?"

"Who's this undersized squid," William demanded scowling. "Something the cat brought in?"

"This is my husband, Ernest Sproul," Ellen said not without dignity. "I must have been out of my mind when I married him; and now I can't get rid of him!"

That night, after the others had retired, brother and sister sat long before the fire talking on and on, from time to time putting on a fresh log.

"I didn't know whether you'd ever speak to me or not!" William admitted. "The

way I neglected you. But you know I always was obstinate; and after I tried to get you to leave here and come to me, and offered you a good home, and you wouldn't budge, I got sort of sore. And after that the years rolled round so fast, that I got to be ashamed to write again; and then, I got scared to do it. Afraid I'd hear you had died in the meantime! But now you've forgiven me, I promise you that you'll never regret it!"

" You still follow the sea, Willie?"

" Yeah. Got my master's tickets in steam and sail. Made my pile, too! And now I'm fixed so I can stay ashore more. Don't look to get me another berth for a full year. Promised Annie that. She's the daughter of a ship chandler out there on the Pacific coast. Nicest girl I ever met; you'll love her, Nell! And now, tell me all about this make-believe brother of ours, George Bangs! Start at the beginning, and let me have the whole yarn. I'll fill my pipe."

It took a full hour in the telling: Ellen's marriage to the respectable and seemingly eligible Ernest. His refusal to bear any share in the upkeep of the place; his disagreeable traits, and her final decision that they would be happier apart. The evil inspiration that had led her to advertise for a " mean " man, to impersonate the brother she supposed must surely be dead long years ago; and her bitter disappointment when George petered out in his meanness, and she found that instead of getting rid of one man, she had merely got herself saddled with another!

" And now that Ernest knows everything, of course he will never get out," she sighed. " It is his legal right to stay here; he is after all my husband, and I couldn't bring a single thing against his character! He don't drink, he is moral, he don't act cruel toward me, what I mean is he never lays hand on me; and so I guess I've got to put up with him till one of us dies!"

The real William pulled on his pipe for some time in silence. Then: " You sure you want to get free? That you don't care anything about Ernest?"

" No more'n I care about a last year's bird-nest," snapped Ellen.

William nodded, tapped his pipe against the side of the brick hearth. " Righto! Then we can fix it easy as anything. You say this George wants to marry Jennie. Is that right?"

" They say so, and they really seem fond of each other," admitted Ellen.

" All right. You are to come out West with Annie and me, as I said. For a good long visit anyhow, or to live with us right along, if you will! Anyhow, this house and farm don't belong to Ernest; no part of it! Now, this is what we'll do, to make it all ship-shape and legal so there will be no come-backs.

" Lease the farm to George Bangs and Jennie, soon as they're spliced. They to keep, and look after old Jake. After that, you don't even have any rights here yourself, see? They could order you right out if they wanted to. But you're going, anyhow; with us. And soon as we've gone, it is up to George to give Ernest his orders to walk the plank!

" He can go where he likes—so long as he keeps out of my way! And when you get homesick, and want to come back, why just come, that's all! You don't have to renew the lease; but if Ernest tries to sneak back again, you can always do it if necessary."

" I've always wanted to see Hollywood," said Ellen quite surprisingly.

Spring had come to Miller's Creek. Patches of snow were still to be found in the deep woods, besides clumps of arbutus. The old Miller horse kicked his heels rheumatically in the already pale green fields. Robins were getting plentiful.

In the ten-acre lot, George Bangs and Jennie were gathering dandelion greens for dinner; the first mess of the season. As he leaned over to the pleasant task, a tiny field mouse poked its head out of a burrow; and with a sudden sweep of his hand, George caught him and, holding him between thumb and finger by the tip of his tail, he walked over to where Jennie was industriously rooting in the moist earth.

" Look what I found for you, Jennie!" he called.

Jennie looked up, her face red and smil-

ing. Then, catching sight of the twirling mouse, she indulged in the immemorial right of woman, and squealed, backing away from it.

"Laws, George! Ain't you the *meanest man!*!"

George Bangs came to a full stop, his mouth open. His nerveless fingers unclasped, and the mouse dropped, and scuttled off.

The words roused an ancient grief. The meanest man! There had been a time when he would have hailed this as praise well deserved. But now—

A grin stole across his tanned face.

"Come on, Jennie! Let's go back. We got greens enough now to feed all the livestock. I'm hungry!"

Hand in hand, Jennie swinging the big basket of dandelions, they trudged back to the old house, from whose great chimney a banner of smoke rose straight in the clear air.

Everything was against a man acting up mean, here in Miller's Creek! None the less, George chuckled as they passed the wall where had first learned all about poison ivy.

THE END



A VENETIAN TRAGEDY

OH, a wily Venetian son of a gun—
The son of a gondolier—
Declared that the day of the gon was done;
His voice was a haughty sneer.
He said, "I will get me a chuggety-chug
And chivvy it far and near—"
This son of a gun was a petrol bug,
This son of a gondolier.

So he hoarded lira and bought him one,
This son of a gondolier,
And he tinkered from morning till set of sun
All fruitlessly, dear, oh dear!
For the chuggety-chug wouldn't chuggety-chug,
But sulked in a manner queer;
So the son of a gun wore a saddened mug,
This son of a gondolier.

Oh, this son of a gun was filled with woe,
This son of a gondolier,
That his chuggety-chug refused to go;
He trickled a salty tear.
A hammer he took, and a monkey wrench,
And he made of that craft a smear—
This son of a gun who was son of a wench
Who had wedded a gondolier.

Then he took him a pole as in days of old,
This son of a gondolier,
And a greasy upholstered gon he poled,
On the Grand Canal, my dear.
For you know old Venice must be herself,
Lest the tourists disappear,
Which would rob every son of a gun of his pelf—
Every son of a gondolier.

Strickland Gillilan.



The Crucible

By SINCLAIR MURRAY

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

THROUGH her refinement and loveliness Sylvia Denby obtains employment from Marcus King, a strange man of tremendous force, power, and wealth, who is relentless in using and crushing anybody or anything to achieve success, and whose dominance and fascination are almost mystifying. Sylvia is somewhat perturbed because of her love for a childhood sweetheart, Jim Brent, who is accumulating for a home while he works as engineer in the Vietrix mine in Canada. However, she goes on with the work, which ostensibly consists of being companion to Miss Beatrice King, supposed to be King's sister and subject to moments of delusion in which she believes she is his wife. She and Sylvia form an instantaneous affection for one another. Mrs. Byfleet and her husband, housekeeper and chauffeur respectively of Shadow Manor, where Sylvia is installed with her charge, behave very peculiarly toward Sylvia and suggest some occult force. Following an automobile accident which injures Beatrice King, Byfleet warns Sylvia to be constantly on her guard.

CHAPTER IV.

FALSE SAFETY.

THE hours passed slowly in the sick room where Beatrice King lay hovering on the edge of consciousness and when, a little later, the hazel eyes opened again on the world of life it happened that Sylvia Denby was sitting close by, and it was on her exquisite face that the gaze of Beatrice fell first of all.

The girl remained quite motionless while, for a space these two beheld each other. There was something poignant and touching

about it, as if it were the meeting of well loved friends after a long parting, and the moment seemed quite perfect without speech. It was only slowly and with a gradually increasing breathlessness that Sylvia realized that she was looking into a face of calm intelligence.

Perhaps Beatrice realized it, too, because, almost to the eye, she seemed to be summoning to her aid faculties of whose existence she was aware, but of whose powers she appeared a little uncertain. When finally she spoke it was very slowly, very carefully, and as if she were determined to make

no mistake in this first attempt. Quite visibly she was securing domination over a long wandering mind.

"You are Sylvia Denby," she said in the ghost of a voice.

The other girl nodded. "Yes, dear, I'm Sylvia."

"And I've seen you often before, haven't I?"

"Yes, I've been with you for nearly three weeks. You feel better now, don't you?"

"Much better. Wasn't I sick for a long time and didn't something happen when we were together?"

"Yes, but we can afford to forget that now."

"You came here to take care of me, didn't you?"

"Yes, your brother engaged me in London."

An extraordinary change came over the thin but still lovely face.

"My brother?" she whispered.

"Yes, dear, you remember; Marcus King."

Beatrice stared at her. A stare in which astonishment, fear, resentment, and a complete and final understanding were vividly mingled. It was the look of a woman who *knew*, and could have been given by no other.

She did not answer for a moment, but Sylvia was aware that myriad thoughts were arising in her brain, thoughts that were clear and consecutive and not empty imaginings of one afflicted. It gave her the feeling that she had discovered a new woman, one who had only a bodily likeness to the one she had known a few hours previously. Then the colorless lips moved.

"I do not want to speak about myself now, but of you. Will you tell me just how you came here and where you came from?"

Sylvia told her, and, as she spoke, she felt fortified in the belief that this time she was not ministering to a mind diseased. She told her all that she had told King, and more; told her of efforts to get a position, of her joy at the arrangement made in Moorgate Street, of the salary settled, of the duties outlined for her and, added to this, a brief account of her own girlhood and

the family disasters that had made her dependent upon her own effort. Beatrice listened intently and, at the end, made a sympathetic gesture.

"It is all most interesting, and I know it is true. Is there not something else, perhaps nearer and dearer that you would like to tell me also?"

Sylvia nodded and went on. She described Brent and the youth they had spent together, his boy's devotion, his wanderings and his letters and, lastly, the most important letter of all: asking her to be his wife and join him when he was able to have her. Then she told of her answer to it and how, for some strange reason that she did not understand, she had given no details of her present position or even the name of her employer. As she said this the frail hand of Beatrice closed suddenly over her wrist.

"You were very wise not to do that—oh, I can't tell you how wise you were."

Sylvia gazed at her. "Why?"

"You must not ask me anything, dear, now, and think not of me, but just of yourself. I feel that to-day I cannot do more than warn you to watch, watch everything and everybody. You must not appear to be on your guard, nor must you speak of anything except everyday matters to any one but myself."

"There is no danger here for me now, because all I have to do is to lie quietly until my strength comes back and then I shall be more than able to take care of myself. Did I"—and here she sent the girl an unaccountable glance—"did I say many queer things to you since you came?"

Sylvia stroked her hand. "Some of them sounded very queer, but all the time I felt that some of them were true."

"Well, it doesn't matter now, so please try to forget them. Sometimes the truth takes strange forms." Is"—she hesitated and a quick flush rushed to her temples—"is Mr. King in the house?"

"No, he has been away for a week on urgent business and is not expected back for some days, at least, so Mrs. Byfleet tells me."

"Has Mrs. Byfleet been kind to you?"

"Yes, quite."

"And you've noticed nothing unusual about her?"

Into Sylvia's mind flashed again the memory of the extraordinary scrutiny with which she had been greeted on the day of her arrival, but, thinking rapidly, she decided that mention of this had better wait until later. Over Beatrice's face was stealing a look of utter fatigue, and her companion trembled lest this swift return to consciousness be unduly taxed.

"No, she only strikes me as a capable woman who does her duty very faithfully."

"I'm glad of that," said the weak voice, "and now, before I go to sleep, let me advise you when Mr. King comes back not to let him see in your manner that I have in any way changed. I'll help you all I can.

"Humor him as far as you are able, and please go on exactly as if nothing had happened. And just as soon as I can I will tell you more, but," she added as a great drowsiness overtook her, "if it should come to a question of your own safety, think only of that, act only on that, and, whatever you may think it wise to do in your own interests, be assured that even if you are not here things are better with me than they've been for a long, long time."

Marcus King returned to Shadow Manor on the third day after the accident. He had been in long distance telephone communication with his office, and, learning that the only serious damage was to the car, had telegraphed to Byfleet to replace it with another during repairs. Sylvia heard of this through Mrs. Byfleet, and marveled at the detached calmness of the financier.

For the rest of it, she was continually conscious of that brief but potent warning from Beatrice. The latter, as if exhausted with this, her first effort, had said nothing more because her strength would not permit it, but now and again she sent Sylvia a quick smile, reassuring if fleeting, as if to tell her that all was well.

Whatever slight change might be discernible was in Mrs. Byfleet, who seemed less detached and a little less imperious. Her manner was almost that of a woman who was anxious to stand well with those around her. But Sylvia asked herself if

this was likely to continue after the return of the master to Shadow Manor.

Marcus King, however, betrayed nothing except a keen and apparently genuine interest in the well being of those under his roof. He went immediately upstairs and remained for the greater part of an hour with Beatrice, while Sylvia racked her brain to determine what manner of interchange might be taking place. The interview was, at any rate, quiet, there were no loud voices, no pitiful appeals.

This calm lasted until it became almost mysterious, when finally King came out, closing the door noiselessly behind him. Sylvia heard his steps dwindle in the direction of his own room, and it struck her that they were those of a man whose mind is burdened with weighty matters. Then, once again, Mrs. Byfleet tapped at her door and said that Mr. King hoped for the pleasure of her company at dinner.

She hesitated. "I was going to have dinner with Miss King and don't like to disappoint her."

"I've told Miss King," said Mrs. Byfleet, "and it's all right."

Sylvia smiled gravely. "That's very kind of her, but if you'll wait a minute I think I'll speak to her myself." She went into Beatrice's room, and the latter motioned her to come close.

"Mrs. Byfleet told me," she said quickly, "and I think, dear, that you'd better agree. You'll understand later in a way you can't now, but I'm not quite strong enough to have you refuse. I know that sounds queer, though, believe me, it's wiser."

"So be just as natural as you can, and don't forget what I said about not hesitating to do anything in your own interest if you're forced to. Be an actress, my dear. You can't realize what an opportunity there is for good acting here. It will take all your art because you'll be playing with fire."

Sylvia's eyes rounded, but she only nodded, murmured her assent and went back, wondering, to her own room.

"Please thank Mr. King and say I'll be very glad to come."

Those last words lingered with her while she dressed. She was glad, unquestionably

glad, and yet in an odd way hesitant. During the days of King's absence she had tried consistently to elude a mesmeric influence that had begun to fascinate while, at the same time, it filled her with unspoken apprehension. But, try as she would, it seemed that even the apprehension was not without its allure.

In her imagination she had set Brent and King opposite each other, endowing one with her written promise, the dear memories of youth and every quality of strength and courage. Against this she set the man who a month ago was unknown to her, and of whom even now she knew little.

But the fact that she knew so little seemed only to invest him with added interest. That was the strange part of it. She anticipated that not so long after she married Brent she would know him and understand him with a completeness that left no room for further exploration or even question.

But with King it was the obverse of this. Men like him, if there were others like him, would only reveal themselves gradually, and constantly unfold new avenues of interest that incited a woman to the pursuit of new adventure. Such a man would never be drab or commonplace. She did not love Marcus King, but she recognized the novelty of his personality, the brilliance of his mind, his power, charm and invitation.

"I wonder if I am a fool?" she asked herself as she put the finishing touches to her hair.

King greeted her with a friendly smile, that did much to allay her nervousness, and at once began to talk about the invalid. He said nothing about the damage to the car, seeming to regard that as a negligible matter.

"You both had a very narrow escape, and I am amazed that Beatrice has come through it so well. Has she any clear recollection of what happened?"

"I think not. It was all over so quickly."

"It may amuse you, but I'm rather interested to know what she happened to be talking about, if she was talking, at that moment. It sounds a curious question."

Sylvia glanced at him, puzzled.

"The reason I ask is that it might throw some light on her condition if, when she became conscious, she reverted to the same subject."

"No," said Sylvia, "she didn't. Some change seems to have taken place, and she has not mentioned the subject since."

"What was that?" he asked pointedly.

She smiled a little. "It happened to be yourself."

King's expression changed almost imperceptibly. "Is it permitted to ask what she said?"

Sylvia felt the color stealing to her cheeks. "Really nothing," she hesitated, "except what you must know already."

He laughed a little. "I wonder whether that is meant as a compliment or not."

"I must leave you to decide," she parried.

She was standing in front of the fire, and, as she spoke, moved a little nearer the blaze. The light material of her dress swung toward the flame, and, just at that moment, a log crumbled, emitting a cascade of sparks. King sprang forward as quickly as thought, and seizing her arm above the elbow, jerked her away. His face had assumed a queer pallor.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but that was rather a near thing."

She looked at him startled, her skin still tingling from the pressure of his fingers. "Thank you so much. I am afraid I was very careless."

He nodded. "You were in danger, and didn't know it. One doesn't, always. Do you know what fear of fire really is?"

"No, but I think I'm glad I don't."

"You're to be congratulated. It's the only kind of fear of which I happen to be conscious, and it's quite indescribable. When I was a little boy the hotel in which we then lived was burned with several people in it. A foolish nurse took me there next day when the bodies were being recovered, and"—here he shrugged his shoulders—"you can guess the rest. I've never forgotten it, and try as I will I never can. So please forgive me if I hurt you."

He paused for a moment, then added with a strange emphasis. "That is the last thing I want to do."

Her pulse quickened a little "No, really, I'm quite all right. Have you been away from England during the last ten days?"

"Yes, I was in France and Germany on mining business. Incidentally, I heard something that might interest you."

"Oh!"

"It concerns the *Victrix* mine. You remember speaking of that particular property?"

She nodded, too surprised to speak.

"Well, from what I can learn I'm afraid it won't have a very brilliant future."

"Why?" she asked, suddenly dejected.

"Because it does not seem that there is any large amount of valuable ore. It is the sort of mine that might possibly turn out good profits for two or three months, but couldn't keep it up. There are numberless properties of that description, and they form the gambling counters of the mining markets. The record of the *Victrix* is not good up to the present.

"Of course, when I heard this I thought of you and was sorry, and yet in a way glad, because it would prevent you from counting too much on what is only an uncertainty. But now," he added, "please don't think I'm a wet blanket, and come into dinner."

It was a curious meal, during which Sylvia was more than usually silent. King talked as interestingly as ever, but behind him she saw the figure of Brent, which, it appeared, was less distinct than formerly.

She had a depressing consciousness that now, after years of wandering, during which he must have seen more than most men, he had pinned his faith to a losing venture.

What prospect of security was there for her with a man who had so little of the keen perception that characterized Marcus King. That he loved her there was no question; had loved her in his own detached and inarticulate way for years. But could one subsist on love? She had no doubt of his honor, his courage and strength, but felt persuaded that something more than these was necessary for a career.

It may be that King realized what was passing in her mind, because all that he said and the deft manner in which he expressed himself during the next hour,

seemed to accentuate the difference between his own personality and that of the man in the backwoods of Canada.

The thing that seemed difficult for Brent seemed more and more easy for him. This was the thought uppermost in Sylvia's mind when they returned to the drawing-room. She accepted a cigarette, and, as he held the match, felt the intense scrutiny of his dark, expressive eyes.

"You see," he said, after an eloquent pause, "there's so much in store for a girl like you if she is wise enough to take it. Now let me say something, and imagine for a moment that I'm speaking of some one else, of some girl who we will call Phyllis.

"She is like you, so alike as to be in fact your double. She is free as the air, really quite free, though she whimsically considers herself bound by an impulsive answer to an impulsive letter. Her type of beauty is very rare.

"It has something more than daintiness, and carries with it an allure which baffles description because it is composed of both mind and body, but is always and instantly recognizable. Such a girl as Phyllis, and there are very, very few of them, is desired by all men. They cannot help this, and do not want to help it. They would cease to be men if they did not feel it."

His voice, low and vibrant, stopped for a moment, and again she felt her eyes drawn to his.

"Don't you think," she whispered shakily, "that your description of Phyllis is quite complete?"

He smiled and shook his head. "It's hardly begun, because beauty of that kind is immortal. It is sent into the world to rouse men to great triumphs and stimulate them to great emotions. Such women are the real makers of history because their effect is reproduced in the brains and emotions of men. Without them there is no art. The whole earth is searched for offerings worthy of their acceptance."

"On account of them men are merciless toward each other, sweeping aside what stands in the path and setting their faces toward the blinding goal of their great desire. Phyllis, and those like her, are meant to be free—always free, not anchored to

any deadening routine of duty, but, surrounded by beauty, expressing in themselves its own highest form."

The voice ceased. Sylvia was aware of a faint, distant singing in her ears, and a growing throb of something she had never felt before. The slight, straight figure of King stood motionless across the hearth, and became invested with a meaning almost mystical.

He made no attempt to touch or even approach her, but from him seemed to proceed a profound and thrilling significance that she could not escape. Behind his smooth brow she knew that there was at work a brain of limitless capacity, and she thrilled at the knowledge that from such an intelligence as this had come so great a tribute to herself.

It was all unreal, yet terrifically real, the most potent, inescapable thing she had ever experienced.

Now, something whispered that it might never be repeated. What whim of destiny had brought her to Shadow Manor?

Then there drifted in the vision of Beatrice in the quiet room upstairs. "Do not hesitate to act in your own interests," she had said. "What," pondered Sylvia, "were her own interests?" Presently the voice of Marcus King reached her again.

"There is much of all this that cannot be expressed in words. It is too profound for ordinary speech, and, since the world began, can only be translated through some form of art. It is immortal, therefore must have an immortal vehicle. Only art can translate the hunger and desire and passion that once in a lifetime takes a man by the throat.

"My own understanding of art is very slight, because though I feel it intensely there has been but little opportunity to study it. I know, nevertheless, that it is the only undying thing that humanity can produce. Music reaches me perhaps the most intimately of all, so, though I only play indifferently, may I try to persuade the piano to speak for me?"

This time Sylvia dared not look at him. She could only make a little gesture.

King touched a switch beside the fireplace and the drawing-room fell into a soft ob-

scurity, lighted only by the glowing coals and one lamp beneath a tall, shaded stand beside the piano. It brought his slender figure and clean-cut face into a relief both delicate and distinct. Watching him, she felt profoundly stirred.

He began to play, not with the touch of a master of technique, but with the deep sympathy of one who knows his instrument. It was a caressing touch, firm, strong, yet sensitive, to which the lilting keys responded with a tone peculiarly smooth and singing as though utter harmony existed between his finger tips and the vibrant strings.

There was color in his music, and a strength and quality that aroused a flood of memories. The tempo changed from grave to gay, and always there ran through his motif a constant and passionate undercurrent.

He dipped into valleys of tenderness, turning from these to mount the very peaks of desire, but never did he lose a certain persistent melody which gradually crept into her brain, dominated it, and soothed it with an unmistakable caress.

It stayed with her like the touch of lips that are loved and the pressure of arms in which a woman has found her whole world. It promised, cajoled, fascinated, intrigued, and allured her. It obliterated all but itself, and filled her with the sheer sensation that the world held nothing so precious as that which was hers for the taking.

Against all this the memory of Brent struggled ineffectually. Presently it was obliterated. There remained nothing but these pulsing chords, and the image of the man who had waked them into life. Then, while the air was still tremulous, he moved swiftly toward her. She arose from her chair as if hypnotized and stood staring at him, weak and shaken. The next moment she was in his arms.

"I want you," he breathed triumphantly; "I want you as no woman was ever wanted before. Forget the past and everything in it. The world and all that a woman can desire is yours for the asking. Wealth you shall have, and everything that wealth can offer to a beauty like yours. It is written that you will be longed for by many men, but you must be only mine."

"Forget the Canadian forest and the fool who thinks he can bury loveliness like yours in the backwoods. The idea is unthinkable. Come with me now—to-morrow—even to-night, and I will show you what rapture means."

Sylvia quivered in his arms, then suddenly felt as though something had snapped in her breast. Her emotion died more swiftly than it was born, and to her came a stifling perception of the essential meaning of what she heard. Her very soul flamed into revolt, and with all her strength she thrust away this embrace that, in a moment, became unspeakably shameful. What manner of girl did he think she was? Her heart began to pound, and there was a choking sensation in her throat. She stretched out a shaking hand.

"You," she said—"you think that of me?"

His expression had changed swiftly. It reflected no regret, no contrition, but something that, strangely enough, suggested an amused interest. His look might have been that of one who watched a child puzzling over a new toy, but his face had become suddenly pale.

"You are very lovely," he said slowly, "but very ignorant."

She glanced at the door. "There are some things of which I am glad to be ignorant."

"Perhaps, but that will soon pass. The world best remembers those women who have not been bound by custom or circumstance, but who dared greatly and followed where fortune and destiny led."

"I care nothing about being remembered by the world," she said passionately. "Let me go."

With another swift look he stepped to the door, opened it wide, and bowed slightly.

"Before you go let me say one thing more and ask one question."

She paused an instant, impressed by something vital in his voice and manner; but wondered at the same time why she paused. Was the spell not dead yet?

"The thing I want to say is that I have offered you all I have. Perhaps I was not fortunate in the manner of its offering, and

you will realize a little later on that a thing of so great importance to me is not lightly put aside. In other words, this is a beginning, and not an end.

"The question I want to ask is, whether you believe, and will continue to believe in your more thoughtful moments, that you really prefer to be buried alive in the Canadian forests, to undergo hardship, uncertainty, and perhaps privation with a man of whom you know practically nothing, to accepting what I can give you and do for you? I would like very much to know that."

"I prefer it with all my soul," flashed Sylvia.

He smiled inscrutably. "In that case I would like very much to have the opportunity of looking on. Perhaps I shall!"

She fled upstairs, hardly hearing his last words. Safe in her room—or was she really safe?—she stood for an instant still trembling, and tried desperately to see a little way ahead. Once more, and with sharp significance, came back the warning of Beatrice: "Do not hesitate to do anything which is in your own interest."

Now there was only one thing left for her to do.

A few moments later, and after listening intently at the head of the stairs, she went into Beatrice's room. The latter lay asleep, resting peacefully on her side, one arm thrust under the pillow.

Sylvia gazed at her mutely, her mind tense, wondering what was in store for this gentle creature who, emerging from peril, had so strangely regained her calm and fortitude. By her own words, she felt more able now to take care of herself and her future than for a long time past.

There was comfort in that thought, and it made what Sylvia had now determined to do less like desertion. She was afraid to wake the slumberer, but she could not go and leave no parting message. Returning to her own room, she wrote swiftly and coherently, giving no details of what had happened, but saying only that she had no alternative.

She would write to Beatrice as soon as possible, and assured her of a constant af-

fection, hoping that they would meet again soon and under clearer skies. Then, very gently, she slid the note under the pillow where it just touched the sleeper's hand, kissed a strand of the brown tresses which were one of Beatrice's great adornments, and went out on tiptoe.

She knew that inevitably they must meet again, but could not dream how strange would be the circumstances that brought about that meeting.

For the next hour she was very busy in her room, packing noiselessly. With a deliberation that almost amused her, she put in a suit case the bare necessities of the next few days, reckoning that her trunk might remain until sent for.

Comfort did not matter in the meantime. The one insistent necessity was to get away as quickly and secretly as possible. She admitted in her soul that she could not trust herself to see Marcus King again.

The night was fortunately dark when, moving like a ghost, she crept out through the side door that opened on the east lawn, and, seeking the shelter of the trees that bordered it, moved without sound toward Byfleet's cottage.

She used to wonder sometimes why he lived there alone, while his wife had a room in Shadow Manor even after Sylvia assumed charge of her patient. But that was no affair of hers, and now she only felt grateful that it was the case.

Presently she tapped lightly on the small leaded window of Byfleet's quarters. So still was the night that the sound seemed prodigious. There came a yawn inside, an exclamation, a hand feeling at the fastening, and Byfleet's tousled head appeared at the opening. He gaped when he recognized her.

She put a finger to her lips. "Will you do something for me now, quickly? It's very important."

Even in the gloom she could see his look change. He stared at her with swift understanding.

"I'll do anything I can, miss. What is it?"

"You remember saying something to me on the afternoon of the day of the accident?"

He nodded abruptly.

"Well, you were quite right, though you said much less than I expect you might have. I must get away, Byfleet, at once. I can't wait a minute."

"So that's it? I'm not surprised. Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere from here. Can't you take me?"

"Not in the car, if that's what you mean. Mr. King would be sure to hear the engine, then he'd know."

"Well," she said desperately, "will you carry my bag? I must do something, and do it quickly."

Byfleet disappeared in the darkness of the room. "Go round to the door, miss, and I'll be there in a minute."

An hour later the chauffeur put down a suit case in the hall of a small country inn, three miles from Shadow Manor. It was not on a main road and was visited only occasionally by motorists. They had walked fast and silently, and the girl felt exhausted. The man wiped the sweat from his brow and looked at his watch.

"It's ten fifteen. I'll be home at eleven, and to-morrow won't know anything about this. Now I think of it, I haven't seen you all day. The car hasn't been out, and it's good luck Mr. King read the speedometer when I brought him from the station. That will take care of my end of it."

"If I can do anything for you here, miss, please write and let me know, and I'll always be glad to tell you how the poor lady is getting on. And, by God, miss," he concluded grimly, "I'm glad to see you going in time, because I could tell you of others who stayed too long."

Sylvia arrived in London next morning with her mind made up. She could not go back to her aunt, who had never been understanding or sympathetic, and she dreaded a lonely existence in a city which she now realized would be attended with increasing dangers of which she had not hitherto dreamed.

So, gradually, out of the confusion of her thoughts, emerged one definite idea. It was the only thing that seemed possible. There was but one man in the world on whom

she could utterly depend, and to him she now turned as a frightened child seeks its natural guardian.

She might not love Jim Brent in the full meaning of the word, but was assured that he loved her. She could depend on the instinctive decency of his character, and thrilled a little at the thought of the effect her beauty would produce. After all, they were promised to each other, and between them were bonds of happy memories not easily broken.

So, as a menaced craft seeks shelter from the gale, she turned toward the far distant Victrix Mine. The venture was quixotic, and perhaps daring, but in all God's world there was no other place to which Sylvia Denby felt safe in turning.

Four days later she was gliding down the Mersey on a Canadian liner bound for Montreal. The arrangement had not been made without difficulty, for she had little money. After careful thought she had decided to travel second class; it meant that she would arrive in Montreal not quite empty-handed.

Then came the question of her identity. If King desired to trace her, as she felt assured that he would, it would be only natural to examine the passenger lists of various sailings for America. She had hesitated a good deal, until, under pressure of this new anxiety, she gave her name as Sylvia Dart.

As such it was now entered in the second-class list, and the sound of it rather intrigued her. A good-natured steward had found her a chair not far from the white rail that marked the division between first and second class on the lower promenade deck. Thus installed, she stared thoughtfully at the green coast of Ireland, while her book lay unopened on her lap.

She was happier now, much happier. Her quarters were not particularly comfortable, but the plunge had been taken, and she was entering another world—a world in which at least there would be no fear. Hardship—well, she was not afraid of hardship if Brent was the man she believed him to be. Romance—yes, there was every promise of romance. And the future was on the knees of the gods.

She was smiling a little at this thought when a shadow fell on the deck beside her. She lifted her head and looked straight into the face of Marcus King.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE TOILS.

"**H**OW is Miss Dart?" King inquired coolly.

She sat still, unable to answer. The rest of the ship had ceased to exist, and she was conscious only of this unescapable presence.

"This is quite unexpected to me," he went on, "and I'd no idea you were on board—or at least that Miss Dart was on board. Are you still horribly angry with me?"

She gazed at the horizon, not trusting herself to meet his eyes.

"Yes," she said under her breath. "Could I be otherwise?"

He beckoned to a steward, tipped the man, and settled in a chair beside her.

"Look here, please don't misunderstand when I say that I'm sorry I frightened you, and that's the only thing I'm sorry for. You see, it was largely your own fault for being what you are and looking as you looked those two evenings."

"You think I was outrageous, but I assure you I was no more so than any man of my type and temperament would be under the circumstances. And you know that women aren't always fair in matters of this kind."

"What do you mean?" Sylvia demanded stiffly.

"Very few women, especially young women, know how often men are tried when exposed to the flame of beauty. The kind of man I mean responds instinctively. He is invited and allured by the sheer existence of beauty when, very often, no allurement is intended. The time, the place, and the surroundings, all have their effect. So don't be angry when I say that you were a bit too impetuous in your departure from Shadow Manor."

Sylvia found it difficult to reply. There was a frankness about him now that she

confessedly found attractive, and it made his voice and manner none the less striking. Then, too, there was a vast difference between being his employee in a lonely country house and a fellow passenger on a great liner where there could be no such thing as isolation.

Another thing that cheered her was the thought that every turn of the propeller carried her nearer safety, and each successive crumpled wave brought her closer to the man she sought. There was protection here from King if she needed it, and the burden that lay so heavy on her mind lightened enormously.

"How did you leave your sister?" she asked quietly.

He nodded as if welcoming the attitude she adopted.

"Really, I think she's very much better, and, strangely enough, it seems possible that that slight concussion has actually helped her. She's perfectly calm and collected. As to yourself, she does not appear to worry, and told me that you had left a note saying you had been called away."

Sylvia felt comforted.

"Now will you tell me something else?" she inquired.

"Anything I can—if you'll answer me one question."

"What is that?"

"Am I right in assuming that you're going to the *Victrix* Mine?"

She colored in spite of herself. "Yes, I am."

King smiled a little. "That's quite original, but, after all, very natural. Now what can I tell you?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the *Victrix* Mine," he said smoothly. "And I've been thinking for the last few moments how charming it will be to have such a fellow-traveler through the wilderness."

A tingling sensation ran through Sylvia's nerves. "You really mean this?" she demanded startled.

"Why shouldn't I?" he answered evenly. "Would it surprise you to know that my plans were made before yours?"

"Then you haven't—haven't—" she broke off in confusion.

"No, I have not pursued you. I had no idea where you were going until I saw you on board. This is all pure chance, that is, unless," here he paused a moment and looked at her steadfastly, "unless behind what men call chance there moves something bigger and stronger which we recognize as destiny. You have not run away from me, Sylvia"—he lingered a little on the word—"you've run toward me."

It was a moment or two before she could speak. The world had again resolved itself into a maze of doubt, through which moved one dominating and unmistakable figure. She stared at him with an expression of utter bewilderment, experiencing again that sense of helpless fascination. But if he knew what was in her breast at that instant, he gave no sign of it.

"Let me explain something that must be very mysterious to you," he said quietly. "I am the managing director of a London company which is largely interested in mining shares and mines. Among the latter is the *Victrix*. How that particular interest came about you will know later on."

"The single truth for you to remember is that I am engaged on an official visit of inspection, and that arrangements for that visit were decided and my passage booked on this ship two days before you were charming enough to dine with me for the second time at Shadow Manor."

"My own plans have not been in the slightest degree altered by anything that took place that evening. That is what I mean by saying that in running away you have run toward me, that I have not pursued you because," here he glanced at her strangely, "it is not necessary for me to pursue, and that behind the vagaries of chance there looms the more potent element of destiny."

He stopped, made a sudden gesture as if to put an end to the gravity of his manner, then smiled disarmingly.

"Tell me, are you quite comfortable, because I see you're not in the most suitable part of the ship."

She laughed in spite of herself. "Yes, perfectly, and it's all very nice and clean and my fellow-voyagers are most respectable, but I don't like the berth at all."

"I thought that might be the case. Will you allow me to be of any practical assistance?"

"I won't accept anything, if that is what you mean," she said quietly.

"Not even a word in the right quarter which might make a considerable difference? Words are sometimes useful you know."

"I don't understand."

"Well, as it happens, several of the first class berths on this ship are empty and the purser is an old friend of mine. He is a man of naturally kindly instincts and I have an idea that he would be very glad to make you a good deal more comfortable."

Sylvia's pulse quickened a little. She had only been on the ship for a few hours, and while she could remain on deck there was nothing to complain of; but below decks it was a different matter and she had tried not to think of the ten days she was destined to spend in those surroundings. She was still hesitating when there came, as though from a distance, a suggestion that it would be foolish to decline. Then, suddenly, she thought of Brent and her resolution stiffened.

"I'm sorry, but I can accept nothing from you, not even a word."

"Is it Sylvia Denby or Sylvia Dart who refuses?" he asked cynically.

The color rushed to her cheeks and she felt innocent and guilty all in a breath. King took on the guise of an inquisitor from whom there was no escape, and the shadow of fear crept a little nearer.

"Does it make any difference?"

"Not to me, but it might to the purser."

"Why?" she parried.

"Well, considering your looks and personality, it's possible he might be most interested in the fact that you were traveling under an assumed name, and would like to know the real one. That brings in the further interesting question of the reason for a disguise, in which case it's just possible he might ask me."

"If this happens, and it's for you to say whether it will or not, and since his position on the ship is, to say the least of it, official, I might be bound to tell him that you had recently been in my employ and

left it by night without giving any notice. So you see, my dear Sylvia, how imprudent it is to be impetuous."

She glanced at him helplessly. "Is there no escape from you?"

King flung his cigarette over the rail. "What a curious word to use! Here you are, going as fast as you can toward your paragon in the backwoods—by the way, his first official letter came in this week and it isn't remarkable for intelligence—and here am I ready to help you on your journey to this most fortunate of men and make that journey as comfortable as I can, and yet you talk about escaping from me. Really, I don't understand."

So whimsical was he, so skillfully were his words put together, so foolish did he make her appear and yet behind it all so striking was his confidence in his own powers that she did not know whether to smile or frown. One thing alone seemed clear. This unsought companionship could continue for the most two weeks longer, by which time she would be safe at the Victrix.

But, and the thought came to her with sudden conviction, even the Victrix Mine was under the hand of Marcus King. The grim possibilities of this new situation unfolded themselves with threatening clearness until, to her anxious mind, it became evident that there was only one course open to her to follow. She must accept a minor risk to avoid a greater one. And how great that other might be she could only dimly apprehend.

"If you think that the purser really has another cabin available," she said uncertainly, "of course, it would be infinitely nicer."

King put his hand lightly on her shoulder. "Congratulations on the most sensible thing you've done since you came on board. Please wait here a minute."

He went off and, left to herself, she tried vainly to grasp the situation more fully. But it eluded her. "Another fortnight," she whispered, "if I can only carry on that long it'll be all right."

She felt unaccountably tired and it seemed that a weight was lying across her brow. She was puzzling over this, for the

day was fine and the ship steady, when a voice sounded at her elbow:

"With the purser's compliments, miss."

It was a note, short and very civil, in which that official said that he was glad to inform her that he had available a first class cabin which was at her disposal without further charge. If she would give instructions to the man who brought the note, the luggage would be transferred immediately.

Sylvia nodded. Again she felt an impalpable influence around her and again that unaccustomed weight on her brow. When she spoke it was in a voice that seemed to be almost not her own.

"Please tell the purser that I'm very much obliged, and the stewardess may come any time."

The cabin in which Sylvia now found herself installed happened to be one of the most comfortable on the ship, and she delighted in its luxurious spaciousness. She knew that first class passengers usually dressed for dinner and when, at the sound of the second bugle, she descended to the salon she was greeted with a general scrutiny that was definitely approving.

The chief steward, who waited for her at the entrance, conducted her to a chair at the captain's table and she found herself seated beside Marcus King. It was all unbelievable, strange beyond her wildest imagining, and yet true.

"I'm dreaming," she whispered to herself. "I'm dreaming."

But King's conversation for the next few moments showed that this was no fantasy. He introduced her to the captain and two or three other passengers as Miss Sylvia Dart, the daughter of an old friend, and whom he was delighted to find a fellow-passenger. To this she could only smile and agree.

Every moment that passed seemed to spread around her more completely the entangling net of a false position until in desperation she admitted there was nothing to be done except carry the thing off as best she could and fight as best she might against the potent influence that was again surrounding her. So, with smiles and light-

hearted talk with Marcus King seemed to lead in any direction he wished, came the real commencement of that extraordinary voyage.

Days passed and her sense of unreality grew constantly stronger. It was deepened by the fact that Marcus King, to all outward appearance, was nothing more than the friend he had publicly professed to be. Whatever the future might hold, now, at any rate, he had himself well in hand. He made no advances, nor could she detect anything suggestive in his manner, but she knew without a shadow of doubt that she was traversing a threatening sea and had no confidence in her present pilot.

By this time she had built up out of her memories of Brent, a certain wistful affection to which she clung with all her strength. She confessed nevertheless that it was not love. In the nature of things it could not be. He had done nothing to awaken in her any hunger of passion or aught of the profound emotions of which the heart of woman is capable.

What she had conceived for him was a trust and confidence, having succeeded in believing that he could not be false to the recollections of her youth. The vision of him made her happy, but not breathless. She wondered about him constantly, hazarding exactly what sort of a man he might be after all his wanderings.

Several times she was on the point of sending him a wireless message, but always, when the moment came, she had desisted. There was so much that could not be explained before they met, and she shrank from the thought of how it might affect him with regard to herself if he learned that already and without his summons, she was hastening toward him.

No, it must be that explanation waited until later, and then she would have not only his love to lean upon and help her, but also that beauty which, in her secret hours, now filled her with a shy delight. The loyalty and faith of James Brent, that was what she must depend on when the moment came.

She wondered sometimes if now, as more than once in the past, Marcus King was

able to interpret her thoughts. If so, he gave no sign. He mixed freely with the other passengers, a few of whom he introduced to the girl, and it was not until they were halfway across the Atlantic that she suddenly became aware that these latter were all men. She didn't understand it, because there were women on board who attracted her and were of her own kind.

Her next discovery was that a good many of the passengers looked at her with an interest she could not interpret, until there came a distressing consciousness that, while the expression of the men held a kind of secret meaning, that of the women expressed only an obvious distaste. It was when she caught an unmistakably bold glance from a middle-aged man at another table that the truth flashed on her with stunning significance.

Her fellow voyagers on the *Mondania* had come to their own conclusion. And, by reason of her own impetuous actions, there was not one soul on the ship to whom she could turn for refuge—least of all Marcus King.

If King knew all this, as she concluded he must know, he betrayed nothing. He sat beside her for hours on the deck, attentive, outwardly gallant and solicitous for her comfort. Not by any word or look did he expose her to criticism, but there remained the fact, spread by an officious steward, and gradually reaching most individuals on board, that by arrangement of Mr. Marcus King, the attractive Miss Dart had shifted from a second to a first class cabin. And that was quite enough.

It was on the evening before they sighted land that King made his next move on the chessboard of fate. He was seated beside the girl in a sheltered corner of the promenade deck. The sea was calm, the ship steady and myriad stars hung suspended, luminous in the purple night.

No sounds could be heard except a strain of music from the salon and the hissing wash against the *Mondania*'s long, sleek sides. It was a night of beauty, and invested with more than ordinary promise. To-morrow another continent would lie low on the horizon.

King began in his usual way, that is, he

talked about anything except the one matter which she presently perceived to be uppermost in his mind. As he talked she felt, as she knew she must whenever he chose to exercise it, the distinctive allure of his personality.

She realized now to the full the physical comfort he had provided for her and, such was the mesmerism of his presence she found it more and more difficult to tax him with having put her in the position she felt she held in the minds of her fellow passengers. She had agreed to that position. That was the fatal step.

"How strange it is," he said slowly, "that we should be bound for the same destination—and more strange that we should seek the same man. Does it give you a sensation of the inevitableness of much we cannot understand?"

Sylvia nodded. She knew there was something behind this.

"Of course," he added, "there's one great difference between us in this respect."

"Is there?" she hazarded.

"Well," he replied slowly, "I am expected and you are not; that's a difference, isn't it?"

"Yes," she admitted. King's brain was unfolding itself now, but she had no hint of what was coming.

"I think you were quite right in not cabling," he said quietly.

She stared at him. "How did you know that?"

He smiled. "Would it not have been rather difficult and possibly alarming—even to a paragon of the backwoods—to put the situation in a cable?"

She did not answer.

"At any rate"—his voice was very thoughtful—"you were quite wise. It would have been a stupid thing to do merely on account of a very frank proposal made you by one who admires you and craves for you more than you can possibly imagine."

"Please don't," she said in a low voice: "it's cowardly of you." Fear and fascination had assailed her again.

He shook his head. "It's not cowardly to ask a lovely woman to throw away petty things and make-believe emotions and not

to waste her loveliness in the desert. It's not cowardly to promise you all that the world can offer.

"You are drawn to me," he went on in tones of extraordinary confidence, "and you cannot deny it. You shrink from what you do know, because of your apprehension about things of which you are ignorant. The last thing I want is that you should be unhappy with me and once you've surmounted the narrow tenets of convention I can give you such happiness as is not dreamed of by any ordinary woman."

He paused, laid his hand on hers and, with a subtle change of inflection, continued evenly. "We are going to the Victrix mine together, you and I. Now tell me what you will do when you get there. You ought to be very clear about that because the situation is rather delicate.

"And if you hesitate about accepting my escort, which you will presently see you are not in a position to decline, I may tell you that you will find the journey extremely difficult and perhaps impossible for a young woman who is unmarried and singularly attractive.

"I want you to think carefully about this before answering, because I'm intensely in earnest. That matter isn't as simple by any means as you take it to be. You're up against the point of view of the world which, as I think you are beginning to perceive, is apt to be critical, especially about women.

"I'll just hazard one guess. Is it in your mind to tell Brent your whole story, yours remember, not mine, the minute you arrive at the Victrix?"

"Yes," she admitted, shakily, "it is."

King smiled whimsically. "That would be an egregious mistake."

"Why—wouldn't it be the truth?"

"Would you speak as Miss Denby or Miss Dart?"

Sylvia caught her breath. "Cruel," she whispered, "cruel."

"It may sound that way to you, but every man is apt to be cruel when he hungers for a woman like you. No, that would only be a false move and immediately destroy what I maintain is your remarkable opportunity."

"Opportunity for what?" she countered.

"Think for a minute," he went on, musingly. "You told me that you were promised to a man who, in the nature of things must be almost a stranger, but who—if you keep your promise which is really not binding at all, being only the impulse of an impetuous girl—has it in his power to make life a hollow disappointment.

"Now you have it in *your* power to see this man in the setting he has chosen for you, to appraise and consider him, to see exactly what manner of man he is, he being all the time ignorant of your identity. You told me that it is improbable that he will know you after so long a time.

"On top of that, I tell you that if you are wise enough to use this extraordinary opportunity which, without question you will use"—here King's voice took on a dominant note—"and meet him as Sylvia Dart and not Sylvia Denby, it is impossible—he should know you. And," he concluded with quiet authority, "this is what you will do."

"I will not," she said swiftly. "I can not."

He made a little gesture. "You will, because it was all arranged."

"How can it be arranged? The thing is unheard of."

"Because," he replied contentedly, "after I was fortunate enough to be able to arrange for your comfort on this ship I wirelessed to Mr. James Brent, the manager of the Victrix mine, that I would be accompanied on my official visit by my niece, Miss Sylvia Dart."

There was a long, long silence, and presently as if in a dream, she heard his voice again.

"It is quite inevitable. It is all meant, planned and decided. If you need any confirmation of this you may be interested to know what I was doing during my recent absence from Shadow Manor. Well, frankly, I was getting control of the Victrix mine, the name of which property you had kindly provided. It wasn't a difficult matter, and I picked up the shares cheaply enough.

"As to the mine itself I care nothing. It may sink or swim. The property may be worthless or valuable, but again that

does not matter. My interest is in the manager, not the mine. James Brent is only important to me because, at the moment, he stands in my way. It would surprise him to know now that he is in the hollow of my hand; but that is his actual position, and I will not submit to interference from any man living when it comes to the question of the woman I want.

"You may wonder why I want you so much, and think it is only hunger for your beauty, but there is something more than that. What it is I cannot explain nor will I attempt to. It is not capable of explanation."

Sylvia began to tremble and again felt the firm pressure of his hand. "I've nearly finished, and then you may say what you like. It won't make any difference, but let me finish first. I want you to see clearly that a false move on your part will ruin this man you say you care for, though in my soul I don't believe you do care.

"And after all, how much is there that you can tell him which is worthy of his credence. You accept a cabin from me on this ship—no steamship company gives cabins de luxe for nothing—and pose before hundreds of strangers as the daughter of an old friend. In other words, you are as short-sighted as you are compromised, and as compromised as you are beautiful."

"You mean," she remarked bitterly, "that I am a fool?"

"If you like to put it that way. Now, what do you propose to do about it?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE LOVELY FOOL.

SYLVIA lay awake that night listening to the faint throb of the engines, while the daintiness of her cabin took on the similitude of a prison. The thing that stirred most vividly in her brain was not so much that Marcus King had at last unveiled himself, for she had had glimmerings that this must come before long, but that with a cynical confidence in his own powers he had called her a lovely fool.

This had not rankled so deeply were she not forced to admit its truth. With every

successive step she had become more entangled, and, looking back at the last few weeks, she marveled at her own blindness.

There was no comfort in the reflection that at every turn she had unwittingly encountered an art, a shrewdness, and resolution so superior to her own. /

It was the thought of this art and versatility that had diverted her mind into a new channel, and slowly she became aware that King's last challenge, a challenge made with all his calm assurance, had been to a contest in which he defied her to escape him.

She could see with utter clearness that he took her to be weak and unsophisticated, that her protests seemed to him only temporary, and that he credited her with no real power or resolution or action.

In other words, having displayed no art of her own, she was in consequence defenseless. This last implication, strangely enough, now aroused her so completely that, with an effort as surprising as it was swift, she shook off the mental lethargy which, from the first, the presence of Marcus King had seemed to impose.

In that moment she accepted his challenge.

A fool she might have been, but even fools were not always impotent.

In was really her innocence and lack of experience which nerved her to this. Had her past life brought her into touch with men she might never have attempted it, but being ignorant, she had no means of determining how much she might safely undertake. No other man had ever before unfolded his mind to her as Marcus King had done, and she had nothing with which to compare it.

There was one point of comfort to which, slight though it might be, she clung hopefully. King had showed her his map and indicated the route to the Victrix, and the route he proposed to follow was the one she had selected herself. So, of the journey she felt reasonably sure. But, she would be alone with him in the wilderness for two days.

Then, out of the innocence of her heart, came a strange assurance. Behind the shrewd and unscrupulous brain of Marcus

King must be a power that was greater still. It could not be that, if she could nerve herself for the trial at hand, she was destined merely to satisfy his desires. Life must hold something finer than that.

She knew that already, in the eyes of the world, she was compromised, but the sheer whiteness of her soul made it impossible for her to comprehend the full meaning of her position—and ignorance—nothing but ignorance guided her like shining armor. King invited combat, the test of brain and wit and courage and endurance.

"Well," she whispered to herself, "for the sake of a distant lover, whose future is imperiled, I will meet that test."

A few hours later, when they met on deck after breakfast, King for the first time felt a strange sensation of surprise. Sylvia, as he expected, and he knew that she could do nothing else, had agreed to his proposal, but her consent was given in a manner which piqued and faintly puzzled him.

He wondered at first if, having lowered her defenses, she had accepted the situation with a sort of helpless resignation, and decided to take the path he knew would be followed by many a woman under similar circumstances.

But he felt persuaded that there was something in her manner that could not be characterized as helpless. She seemed more alert, and spoke with a bright vivacity that carried with it an added attraction.

In the past he had not credited her with any special mentality, there having been little reason for that, but it was not mentality he desired. It was the passionate abandon, devoid of bond or convention, that he craved, that strange outpouring of themselves in the flaming temple of desire to which, from the first, so many men of genius have given themselves.

What might come after that he did not care, and, in a strange way to men like himself the pursuit had almost the allure of its achievement. Looking at Sylvia that morning, he decided instantly that the pursuit was more worth while than ever.

"Well," he said with a provocative smile, "you look unusually fit."

She nodded. "I am, and I'm longing to see the coast of Canada."

He pointed to a faint blue line that lay far on the horizon. "There are the straits of Belle Isle, and beyond them the Gulf of St. Lawrence, a wonderful gateway to a wonderful city."

"Then Quebec?"

"Yes, a bit of medieval France which Canada is wise enough to preserve unaltered. Then Montreal, where we leave the ship."

"Please go on. It's all so new to me and rather exciting." Sylvia looked lovely at that moment, her eyes alight, a flush in her smooth cheeks.

"From Montreal we take rail for nearly two days, then, at the jumping-off place, go on by canoe. That's where the wilderness really begins."

Sylvia felt thrilled and looked it. She had begun to act now. She was acting with all her art, and her brain had never seemed so alive before. She knew she had made a good beginning, and her former sense of insecurity dwindled perceptibly. Then she met King's curious glance, and was amazed that she could encounter it without a quiver.

"You evidently know Canada," she hazarded.

"Some of it, but not where we're going now. The Victrix is in a new district." He laughed a little, as if to himself. "Do you know the real meaning of the word Victrix?"

"No, but I've wondered."

"It means, she who conquers," he said gravely. "Does that sound in any way propitious to you?"

She smiled at him daringly. "If I were superstitious I would consider it a very good omen for Sylvia Dart. I wonder what's going on there now?"

As a matter of fact, there was not very much going on at the Victrix as yet, and this thought was in the mind of a young giant of a man who was, at that moment, walking thoughtfully down a forest trail that dipped sharply to where a cluster of log-hewn buildings showed their flat roofs in a clearing. Close beside them was the shore of a mirrorlike lake around which arose the dark green ranks of sentinel pines.

The young man glanced indifferently at the camp, and went into one of the smallest

of the buildings. Here he lighted his pipe, seated himself in a homemade chair constructed out of a barrel and an empty sack, and became dissolved in thought.

He was a large man, with broad, massive shoulders and long, powerful arms. His hair had the tinge of dark copper, his eyes were gray and steady, his chin square and resolute, and over him rested the seal of a life spent in the open. He wore neither collar nor cap, and his blue flannel shirt, unfastened at the neck, his long prospecting boots laced to the knee, the canvas trousers, all spoke of the son of the wilderness.

It was chance that brought James Brent to the *Victrix*. He had nearly encircled the globe, and was on the last leg of a six-year journey when, in Toronto, he happened to hear of the property. The *Victrix*, he was informed, was believed to be valuable, but had suffered grievously from mismanagement. There was an opening for a capable superintendent, and for this he applied, fortified by experience in South Africa and Australia.

The company's Canadian solicitor, impressed with his obvious energy, as well as the letters of recommendation he brought with him, had cabled at once to London, and, as a result, Brent now found himself installed, ruler of this tiny settlement, and for the present at any rate the dictator of his future.

Thus had been occasioned the letter to Sylvia. In the last six years he had seen enough of women to make him treasure, ever more closely, his memory of the long-legged girl who tried to smile when he carved the outlines of two intertwined hearts on the trunk of a far-away beech tree.

Looking back at it now, it seemed that, at the same time, he had carved her name on his own heart, and always, even when the sky was darkest, the memory and the picture of her persisted, carrying him through danger and disappointment, inciting him to greater effort. He did not look like a man subject to profound emotions, but his memory of Sylvia was nevertheless his lighthouse, his incentive, and his consolation.

And the very day on which he took charge of the *Victrix* and pictured Sylvia beside him in this breathless forest, he had written and given voice to the long unsatisfied desire of his heart. Now she was waiting, waiting for the summons which he was determined should go to her before the year was much older. Sylvia and the *Victrix*—they were mingling inextricably in his mind when the door opened and a girl entered the office.

"Well," she said smiling, "are you going to take me fishing this evening?"

She was very dark, very strong and supple, fairly glowing with health. Brent, looking at her with a friendly twinkle, thought that she might have been the spirit of the forest in which she lived. Her face was well formed, her mouth, though a little large, was well shaped and had a passionate curve, her eyes quick and, in an odd way, luminous. She was dressed with a studied carelessness that heightened a certain fascinating and gypsylike effect.

It was strange, thought Brent, that a man like Parfitt, his mill superintendent, should have such a daughter, and he wondered what manner of woman the mother could have been. Then he pointed to a pair of delicate balances under a glass case on the table, and shook his head:

"I'm awfully sorry, but I can't. You know how things are going up at the mill, and I've simply got to make these assays."

Dorothy sent him a frown of mock anger. "But the cook really needs fish; he told me so. It's true this time."

"And you really think that fish are more important to the company than the figures I'll have in an hour or two?" He grinned.

"Much more. And I don't see why you should always, always be thinking about the old company."

"Isn't that what I'm here for? It's certainly what I'm paid for; although," he admitted, "I'd much sooner go fishing. So, if you'd like to help, really help very much, you'll go off by yourself and get a tremendous catch, and thereby save the company a lot of money and assist my good record as manager."

The girl turned on her heel and glanced at him over her shoulder.

"Silly," she said, "it isn't the fish I'm thinking about."

She went slowly down to the shore where her canoe lay at the little timber landing stage and glided silently toward the opposite margin of the lake. She was perfectly at home on the water, but since Brent's arrival a few weeks previous had found this solitary method of transport less and less attractive.

For the first time in her life she had been thrown into intimate contact with a man whose station was higher than hers, and the situation held for her an increasing interest. The daughter of a man whose horizon was bounded by mines and mills, and who had lived constantly on the fringes of civilization, she was hungry for the experiences of other girls more fortunately surrounded, and of which she read avidly whenever the opportunity came.

She was a little contemptuous of those of her own class, especially if they were of her own sex, and believed that destiny would carry her beyond boundaries at which she had already begun to chafe.

The advent of James Brent seemed to make this possible. She did not yet admit that she loved him, but only knew that she wanted to be with him and that he appealed to her more than any man she had ever known. And, in truth, there was that about Dorothy Parfitt well calculated to awake a masculine response, especially in the wilderness.

Her smooth face had a touch of the voluptuous, and she was dark, lovely, and as agile as a deer. She knew that she was in the setting that suited her best; and that helped enormously.

Brent watched the canoe from the window of the assay office until it dwindled to a speck, then turned thoughtfully to his work. There was much to occupy him at the moment. During the first few weeks after his arrival he had given himself up to a close examination of the property from every possible angle, and had come to the conclusion, first, that there had been established the existence of a promising body of ore; and, second, that the reason that the mine was not more profitable might involve human as well as scientific factors.

He had already begun to be troubled, but considering the fact that he was still a comparative stranger on the ground, was wise enough to keep his own council. He had started his assay furnace, and was busy pulverizing samples of ore when another visitor entered his office.

Brent gave a nod. "Well, Murdoch, how goes it?"

Bob Murdoch was underground foreman of the Victrix, a tall, lean Scotchman, who had been at the Victrix since the mine was discovered, and knew its underground workings as the palm of his hand. There was something in common between him and Brent. They shared the same upstanding directness, the same fearless candor, and measured each other by the same simple and exacting standards.

But of late, and for some reason that he tried in vain to determine, Brent felt that Murdoch's manner had undergone a subtle though significant change. And he puzzled his brain to know why.

"It's all right on the third level, sir," said Murdoch.

"Did you fire that round of shots?"

"Yes."

"And what does the vein look like now?"

"It looks good, about six feet from wall to wall, and all quartz."

Brent grunted contentedly. "That sinking pump is lifting properly since we put the new valves in?"

"She's doing a good deal better than she did yesterday."

"The shafts making any more water?"

"No; about the same." Murdoch glanced at the assay furnace. "I'd be glad to know how those last samples came out."

"I haven't finished yet, but they seem to carry a little free gold. I'll tell you to-morrow, or after supper if you like to come in again."

Murdoch nodded, seemed about to speak, then checked himself.

"Anything else?" said Brent, glancing at him curiously.

The other man hesitated, while a shade of uncertainty crept over his usually resolute features. Then he lifted his chin. His

gaze, wandering to the lake, had fixed on the canoe, now close to the opposite shore. He knew whose canoe that was, and whose was the arm that so deftly wielded its flashing paddle. The faintest wrinkle deepened on his brow, and his strong face became suddenly grave.

"There's nothing more just now, sir," he said quietly, and strode off in the direction of the men's quarters.

Halfway there he swerved and, leaving the camp, took a little used trail that climbed steeply through a tangle of forest to the ridge of a near-by hill. Looking from this eminence, the lake was spread out below him like a molten mirror, and he could discern more clearly the opposite shore.

The canoe was drifting now, with only an occasional stroke of the paddle, and there was an intense hunger in his look as he followed its careless course. A few weeks ago, even a fortnight ago, he would have been there himself watching the face that for the past year he had loved better than any other.

He was not conscious in his own mind of any change in his manner toward Brent, but knew only too well that between himself and Dorothy matters were not now as they once had been. The companionship that he treasured seemed to be at an end.

He racked his brain to discover whether he had done anything to deserve this, but could remember nothing except that, very slowly, and very certainly, and commencing with Brent's arrival at the *Victrix*, the change had come about.

It had begun to hurt him horribly, and because he was by nature a silent man the wound went deeper. The strange thing was that, suffer as he might, he could not altogether blame Brent. They were too much like each other, this pair, too straightforward, hard-working, and courageous for one to misread the other; but Murdoch knew, and knew inevitably, that as things went Brent would before long be able to apply successfully for that gift which he himself had so deeply desired. And the more impossible this appeared, the deeper grew the desire. It struck him that the thing was horribly unfair.

The thoughts of the manager of the *Victrix* were not on Dorothy Parfitt. He was secretly wondering why, after that first letter in which Sylvia had told him all that he hoped to hear, there should follow more than a fortnight of silence. He had read and reread it until he knew it by heart.

He admitted that it was the only kind of letter that might reasonably be written by a girl who had not seen her sweetheart for nearly seven years, but felt, nevertheless, that while it told him what he hoped to hear, it was curiously uninformed about one important fact.

Sylvia had a position. She was glad of it—he would be glad of it—it would help her to help him—and that was all. Not a word of where she was or where she was going, no intimation of the sort of position she had secured, or the type of occupation it involved.

And since in the wilderness the minds of men are apt to turn to small things, to fasten on them and puzzle over them until they assume undue importance, so the mind of Brent reverted again and again to this one angle. And when three times in succession the battered canoes of the mail carriers of the district landed at the *Victrix* without a line from Sylvia, the thing began to gnaw in his brain with disconcerting frequency.

Was it possible that she had written too impulsively and now questioned her own decision? In such case it would be only natural that she should hesitate before confessing it. Was it possible that, on second thought, the idea of beginning life over again in the backwoods of Canada, and with a man who could only claim to live in her memory, was a risk she now felt unable to face?

Had he himself been too impetuous when he wrote? Had he jumped to the conclusion that she still wanted him and was ready to be bound by a childish promise? These questions and many others assailed him with recurring persistence.

It was therefore with a definite relief that he received the surprising information of the change of ownership of the *Victrix*. The news came by cable within a few days of his appointment, and the message in-

structed him to continue his duties. He assumed from this that his position was still secure, but there was always a doubt.

Thus, strangely enough, he was governed by circumstances remarkably like those which affected the girl he expected to marry. Each of them had a new job, and neither of them could be sure whether it was permanent.

Then, close behind the first, came the second cable announcing that the new managing director was about to visit the property, and after that a third saying that King would be accompanied by his niece. Brent was a little surprised, but after all there was nothing unusual about it. He wondered vaguely how old the niece was, and whether she would be content with such rough comfort as he could provide. He decided that this did not really matter. A mine was a mine, the wilderness was the wilderness, and he could only do his best.

The situation on the whole rather amused him. There would be three women on his hands. One very near, a daughter of the outdoors, the gay companion of his hours of leisure; another, to whom he was beholden, but to whom he began to doubt whether he was of vital importance; the third, a complete stranger, who might or might not find endurable a few weeks' existence in this outpost of civilization.

Thoughts of this kind were in his mind when he glanced out of the office window and saw Parfitt coming down the trail that led from the mill.

Parfitt was a large man, soft of body, bland of face, and unctuous of speech. There was nothing about him to suggest the agile charm of his daughter, and, from the very first, Brent had accepted him with a good deal of reserve. He was responsible for what went on in the mill—for the crude ore that was sent into it, and precious amalgam that came out—and with the mill the duties of Christopher Parfitt began and ended. He had no authority elsewhere.

The man's record, so far as Brent could determine, was satisfactory, and without doubt he made a capable superintendent of mill operations. There was nothing about the process in which he seemed lacking, and he performed all his duties with a smooth

dexterity that could not but command respect.

As for the other side of it, he seemed devoted to his daughter, with whom he shared a small house, half bungalow, half shanty, that stood a little apart from the main camp buildings. It was about a hundred yards from the assay office, was the only place in the district which boasted of white curtains, and on its window sills flourished rows of pansies and geraniums that bloomed luxuriantly in discarded tins which Dorothy had painted green.

The house gave one a quaint impression of being a home, and Brent was somehow glad that he could see it by lifting his head. Murdoch used to be glad of this too, but he did not go there now.

It was after supper that Dorothy stepped across and found Brent still at his assay balances.

"My!" she remarked. "You seem frightfully busy."

"I am," he said. "Will you please shut the door; the draft makes a difference to these scales."

She obeyed, and turned to him with a smile.

"Are you pleased, or disappointed, or just nothing in particular? I can't tell by your expression."

He pointed to a tiny yellow speck that lay in the center of a small metal tray. "Do you mean this?"

"Yes, though I can't see how that should be pleasing to anybody."

"Well, as a matter of fact it is—at least, to me."

"Aren't you awfully easily satisfied?"

"Not as a general thing, and this means that in a certain part of the mine the ore is a good deal richer than I expected."

"I can't say that that looks very rich, but I suppose I'll have to believe you. What part of the mine is it?"

"The present end of the third level, which, as it happens, is a very important part. If there's any credit, it's due to Murdoch."

"Why should he get any credit for what was always there?"

"In reaching it so quickly. I didn't think he could. Another reason I am

pleased is that this should be very cheerful news for a man who I expect will be here any day now."

"Who's that?" she asked curiously.

"The new managing director. His name is Marcus King and he's coming on a visit of inspection."

"Is there anything special to inspect?" she asked.

"Yes, for him there's everything. He's never been here before and it's all new. You see, this property has just changed hands, and he represents the new directors." He paused for a moment, and sent her a critical glance. "I've more news for you, too."

"You're full of surprises this evening. What is it?"

"He's bringing his niece with him."

"His niece?" she said startled. "A girl."

"She must be a girl if she's his niece, mustn't she?" he chuckled.

Dorothy's eyes rounded, and she did not answer at once. The news had aroused in her a more intense interest than he could possibly have imagined, and her mind became suddenly charged with questions and curiosity.

"What's she like?" she demanded swiftly, then with a smile: "But you don't know, do you?"

"Haven't the faintest idea. It's a totally new managing director and a totally new niece, and I don't know when they'll arrive except that it may be any day now, nor how long they're going to stay. But I'll have to make them as comfortable as I can and," here he laughed carelessly, "I suppose I'll have to be more particular about my dress."

She shook her head and looked at him with open admiration. "No, I wouldn't if I were you. You're exactly right as you are, and if it were myself, I'd much prefer that you didn't change anything in that way." She hesitated a moment, and sent him a provoking look. "But on the other hand perhaps you might as well. I don't want Mr. King's niece to like you too much."

"You overestimate my charms," he said quizzically.

She shook her head again. "Do you know one of the nicest things about you?"

"I'm glad there is one. What is it?"

"That you don't overestimate yourself. Are you going to take that girl fishing?"

"You mean the mysterious stranger?"

She nodded.

"Yes, if she wants to go. I've got to remember she's the niece of my managing director who is a person of considerable authority."

"Well," said Dorothy with undisguised vexation, "I hope she doesn't get a single bite!"

She went back to her cabin a moment later, scolding herself for feeling suddenly depressed. The last few weeks had been quite ideal, and she resented this unexpected intrusion by a stranger who, in spite of herself, she began to credit with every possible attraction.

There was, too, another angle of it, no less disturbing. King's niece would, without question, have such clothes as Dorothy longed for, but never yet possessed. Life in the backwoods had not robbed the daughter of Christopher Parfitt of instinctive love for dainty things. She saw pictures of them in magazines, and dreamed about them.

Up until the time when Brent arrived at the Victrix she had admitted that there was little point in dressing daintily for the benefit of such men as inhabited the camp, but the coming of the new manager changed all that.

She felt that she knew how to wear beautiful things if she had them, and, in the light of the expected visit of another girl, with whose equipment her own would inevitably contrast unfavorably, she rebelled at being placed at an unfair advantage.

But in all this she was only partly right. The charm of the wilderness is not aided by the creations of Paris and Bond Street, and, although she could not realize it, Dorothy was invariably dressed in the manner that best suited the wild and dramatic setting in which she lived.

Her appearance was that of a daughter of the forest, lovely in her soft, rich color, the quick darkness of her eyes and the strong agility of her body, and she needed,

in fact, no other adornment than her instinctive taste had already provided.

That night after supper, she looked thoughtfully at her father, who sat, smoking silently, a contented expression on his large and rather puffy face. Parfitt was generally regarded in camp as one who wanted to be left alone and had not many friends, the few exceptions being a small group which gathered regularly after every pay day and spent the night over cards.

When not thus occupied, most of his spare time was passed in the cabin, where he took hardly any exercise. He seemed afraid of a canoe. He was a queer, remote character, with little about him that was attractive, and in his life were two great passions. He craved the excitement of gambling, and loved his daughter with all his soul. This evening there was a long pause in their talk, during which he became aware of the girl's earnest gaze.

"Dad," she said suddenly, "can you let me have some money?"

He put down his pipe. "Money? There's nothing to spend it on here. Do you want to bring something in from outside?"

"It couldn't be anything else, could it?"

He smiled indulgently. "How much do you want?"

"Could I have a hundred and fifty dollars?"

He whistled. "That's nearly a month's pay."

"I know it is—but I've never asked you for anything like that before."

"No," he admitted, "that's true. What do you want to buy?"

"That's my secret, but I think you'll be satisfied when you see the result."

He glanced at her with a touch of anxiety. "I'd like to give it to you, Dot, but don't see how I can."

Her expression took on a queer determination. "How much money do you think you spend over cards every month?"

Parfitt flushed and began to feel hot. "Nothing like that, but, isn't that my affair?"

"Perhaps, and now I'm speaking of mine, which may be just as important."

"If you'll make it fifty dollars," he countered, "I'll try and manage it."

Dorothy looked slightly contemptuous, and a retort trembled on her lips. Then, suddenly, she checked herself and gave a careless laugh. "I suppose you've heard the exciting news?"

"No," he said indifferently. "What is it?"

"About the new managing director who's coming up here to inspect the property?"

Parfitt lost his indifference and sat up straight. "Who told you that?"

"Mr. Brent, just a little while ago. You remember you told me that the old owners had sold the *Victrix* last month."

Parfitt nodded. "Go on."

"Well, a Mr. King is on his way here, and may arrive at any time. Mr. Brent says he's going to make the closest possible examination—of everything."

Little flecks of color crept into Parfitt's fat cheeks and, sitting motionless, he looked strangely soft and unhealthy. From eyes half closed, he sent his daughter a slow, searching stare. She wondered why he should be thus affected.

"Did Brent say anything else?" he hazarded, after a long pause.

"No, not about that, except that Mr. King's niece was coming, too."

Parfitt frowned. "Why should she come?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, but she is, and Mr. Brent is wondering how he can make her comfortable."

Parfitt pulled himself together. "Oh," he said shortly, "now I begin to understand."

"Understand what?" The girl smiled a little.

"Why you want a hundred and fifty dollars."

"I thought perhaps you would," she said shrewdly.

"It's for clothes."

"Dad," she said, with a certain quiet impressiveness behind which moved all her resolution, "I don't think I've ever been unreasonable in what I asked, and I want that money more than I've wanted anything in my life. You don't understand what it means to a girl to be without certain things' when suddenly, for the first

time, she is thrown with another girl who has always had them. I don't suppose that any man could really see it.

"I'm not worrying about her looks, I mean whether she's beautiful or not, and I do know if I have that money to use in the way I want to use it I've nothing to be afraid of by comparison with any girl, and," she added meaningfully, "there's another reason, too."

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

"Do you want me to be quite candid?"

"Yes, if it's the case of a hundred and fifty dollars, I think you'd better."

"Then would you like me to marry Mr. Brent?"

Parfitt rubbed the bowl of his pipe, and a slow smile spread over his flaccid features. He wanted this more than anything else, had for the last two weeks been hoping for it, but as yet dared not count on it. There were many reasons why such a thing would be most acceptable, but the most important of all was his own secret and one of which Dorothy had never dreamed.

"You can have the money," he said smoothly.

He went into an adjoining tiny room, his own, and, closing the door tightly, lifted a section of loose board from the floor. Beneath lay two small canvas sacks, one of which seemed to be quite heavy and he picked this up, balancing it musingly for a moment in his broad palm.

Then replacing it, he took from the other a small roll of notes which contained only a few dollars more than the required sum.

He put this in his pocket, replaced the board and, lighting his pipe, opened the door.

"Here's a hundred and sixty," he said. "It's all the loose cash I have until the end of the week."

Dorothy took it, and drew a long breath. These strips of green paper seemed very potent things, and visions of what they could accomplish danced in her brain. She had already worked it all out, knew exactly what things she wanted, what they would cost and by which trip of the mail-carriers they would arrive. The one thing she hoped now was that King and his niece would not arrive first.

"Thank you, dad," she said softly, "and I'll try and make a good investment."

Parfitt nodded sagely. If the result turned out to be what he desired, this was a bargain price. He laughed contentedly, and struck off up the trail toward the mill. Thoughts, many and mingled, went with him, some satisfactory, others increasingly disturbing.

He wondered how much the new managing director knew about a mill. According to past experience, some of these official visitors knew virtually nothing. But one could never tell. In any case, he reflected, the odds were that King's technical skill was very much less than his own.

This brought a certain comfort, and, as the roar of machinery grew louder and nearer, his sense of uncertainty left him. He knew how to replace that hundred and sixty dollars, and without robbing his pay envelope.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



ST. VALENTINE'S EVE

A FROZEN world, a wintry scene,
Within the house there is no glow;
Dan Cupid, with his little feet,
Comes making heart-tracks through the snow!
He finds a spinster lone and cold;
A somber hearth, devoid of light.
His gentle entrance kindles love,
And sends its beacon through the night!

Amanda B. Hall.



The Masked Enchantress.

By A. T. LOCKE

THE amber light from a hanging lamp, hand-wrought of iron and dark with age, lay dimly and serenely over the rich appointments of the studio. It fell upon an antique Spanish table of lusty oak, and touched with lights and shadows the chisel marks which the passing of centuries had smoothed but not obliterated.

Only the ends of the top of the long refectory piece were visible, for, oddly enough, it contained a heap of letters which were piled so high that some of them had slipped off and were strewn over the floor by the sides of the table.

As though indignant at this intrusion upon a setting that was somber and dignified, the light, with its tint of old gold, threw the letters into bold relief, and, startlingly and vividly white, they took on the form of a cowled ghost.

At one end of the table a young man was seated in a sturdy and straight-backed chair of antique design. He was in evening clothes, and was idly contemplating the letters before him, his dark and intelligent eyes clouded with abstraction and speculation. He leaned forward a little, the light burnishing his smooth, dark hair, and with a white and perfectly manicured hand rifled over some of the sealed envelopes.

He straightened up presently and walked through the shadows of the great room to a large window. He drew back an opulent curtain and looked down into Washington Square and the flying snow.

Presently he turned back into the warm and luxuriant room, and with a tiny felt hammer, struck an old Malayan gong. The tone was still swelling and falling mysteriously through the shadows when a bland-

faced Chinaman entered silently through a curtained doorway.

"Mix a bowl of Tom and Jerry, Foo," the young man ordered, "and have it steaming hot."

The servant paused a moment, and a faint smile lighted his impassive countenance.

"Mlista Clobin comin?" he queried.

His master nodded silently, and then, with a smile, added; "And the first thing he'll want, Foo, is a drink." The soft and silvery hum of a bell sounded through the apartment at that moment, and Foo padded quietly through the room and disappeared into the hall. The young man heard the door open and listened to the dialogue which ensued.

"Hello there, you old heathen!" he heard Corbin say, in his thin and nasal voice. "There's going to be a dead Chinaman here if a pitcher of Tom and Jerry isn't forthcoming pronto."

There was a sound of scuffling feet, accompanied by sundry grunts, gasps and wheezes, and the listener knew that Corbin, with the assistance of Foo, was emerging from his wraps.

"Shovel the snow off those things, Foo," the nasal voice commanded, "an' hang 'em up where they'll dry. Oooo-eee-ee! What a night!"

Foo passed down the hall, chuckling as he went, and then the curtains parted and Corbin came into the room.

"The robber!" he ejaculated indignantly as he beheld his friend. "He charged me eighty cents to come down from Forty-Fourth Street, and then he drove away with the change when I gave him a dollar bill. The crook! He knew that his license plate was covered with snow so that I couldn't get his number."

"He got your number first, Tommy," the young man laughed. "That's why he drove away with your change. He knew he wouldn't get a tip unless he helped himself to it."

"You're right he wouldn't have got a tip!" Corbin puffed, with an outraged expression on his face. "He overcharged me anyway, and he didn't have anything more coming."

"But it's a bad night," the young man

reminded his friend, "and perhaps he figured that in."

"Well, if he did, he didn't have any right to," grumbled Tommy. "They charge by the quarter mile, not by the weather. It's a matter of principle, Rod," he asserted stoutly; "a matter of principle. I wouldn't let any man gyp me even if I had your income. No, sir! Not me!"

Then his voice rose shrilly. "Hi-eee, there, Foo!" he called. "Where's that Tom and Jerry? I'm fainting!" He looked at his friend with a jovial smile, winked an eye merrily, and then dovetailed himself into a large chair near the fireplace.

"What in the world do you live way down here for, anyway, Rod," he complained. "Or, why do I always have to come here to see you. I know that you've got other apartments in New York, but I never see the inside of them. I always have to come here to get a look at you. You're not an artist or a writer or a poet. Why do you hang round down here at all? You're a motion picture star, and you belong with the other bright lights uptown."

He paused a moment to catch his breath, and then went on with renewed vigor. "Believe me, kid, if I had ten thousand dollars a week income I'd rent the Ritz tower or have a floor at the Roosevelt. Believe me, I'd strut, boy, I'd strut!"

Roderick Randall stretched back in his chair and smiled at his friend.

"This is one of the places I like," he replied, "as I've told you before. That's the only answer as to why I'm here. Maybe I like dim lights at night because I'm under bright lights all day."

He paused a moment and exhaled a ring of aromatic smoke.

"And then again, Tommy," he went on, "I have a penchant for wanting to be myself. If I was uptown every one would soon know right where I lived. Here no one knows, except two or three good friends like yourself. This is one of my sanctuaries, and, perhaps, my favorite one."

"Your favorite one, huh?" replied Tommy. "Say, Rod, just tell me one thing, and no foolin'. How many apartments have you really got—and why?"

"You wanted one answer, and you've

asked me two questions," complained Rod with a smile. "Well, there's no reason why I can't answer both of them. There's a half dozen, more or less, places in New York into which I can walk and be at home. I'm the only one who knows, or ever will know, where all of them are. You might say that each of them fits a different mood or satisfies a different whim. And, in addition to that, they enable me to get away, when I feel inclined, from my many good friends."

"That's a fine way to feel," accused Tommy. "A regular fellow never wants to duck his friends."

"Maybe," agreed Rod. "But there are times I feel that way, and then, as you know, I disappear. Call me eccentric if you want to, Tommy. If it is eccentric to do as you damn please with your spare time and your surplus cash, then I must plead guilty to the charge. As for myself, I think it is the essence of wisdom to do as you please as long as you don't hurt any one else by doing it."

Tommy shook his head with the air of one entirely lacking in comprehension.

"You're full of notions, Rod," he mourned. "Just full of notions."

He brightened up, however, when Foo appeared with a large bowl.

"That's enough for me, Foo," he chirped brightly. "What are *you* going to have, Rod?"

The latter nodded at Foo, who returned shortly with a silver tray containing a filigreed decanter of Scotch whisky, a bottle of seltzer, and a crystalline goblet. Tommy filled his cup from the bowl and took a sip of the concoction prepared by Foo.

A gibbering blast of wind plunged down the chimney high above, and, with its shrewd breath, blew the sputtering embers into flames.

"Let it bluster," remarked Tommy cheerfully, his face half obscured by the wraiths of vapor ascending from his cup. "I hope summer never comes again." His face was looming redder and redder, and he took off his heavy tweed coat and unbuttoned his vest. Having reached a state of perfect expansion, his eyes wandered around the room and finally rested for a

moment on the pile of letters on the table. He turned to Rod.

"The morning's mail from your many admirers?" he queried, indicating the heap of envelopes.

"Not quite," Rod replied. "They're a part of my mail for the past week, though."

"A part?" questioned Tommy.

"Only the letters which have New York City postmarks," explained Rod.

"Ah!" said Tommy. "I understand. You're all set to step out again, I suppose."

Rod nodded.

"Well, all I can say is it's a dumb sort of procedure," asserted Tommy. "I never could see that there was any sense to it. Now if I had those letters I would sort of hand pick them, and I would know just where I was going when I started out."

He rose to his feet and went to the table where, catching his thumbs through a pair of bright red suspenders, he stood looking at the pile for a moment. He finally reached forward, selected an envelope, and held it up as he turned to Rod.

"Now, me," he went on, "that's the sort of a letter that I would pick out to follow up. Look at the class of it," he urged. "Only *real* people use stationery like that. And take a slant at that nifty little monogram. And look at that cute handwriting. I can just see a picture of the girl who wrote that letter. And, believe me, it's a work of art. She's a débutante from Park Avenue, at least. Gosh!" he mourned. "Why wasn't I born handsome and famous?"

He turned to the table and scaled the letter back onto the pile into which he delved again.

"Look at this one!" he exclaimed. "And this one—and this one. These come from wealth, beauty, and aristocracy, as the subtitle writer says."

He turned and looked reproachfully at Rod, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"And yet," he continued, "you reach into this heap of letters with your eyes closed and select one at random. You trust to luck when there's luck here everywhere you look."

He went back and slumped in his chair, a chromo of despondency.

"If you want to step out once a week with a girl," he continued, "you might pick some one in your own class anyway."

Rod sighed—he had engaged in the same argument with Tommy before.

"I've often told you," he said patiently, "that I don't go out with women because they are women. I go out with them because they are human beings, and because they lead me into the heart of life. If I picked them as you would they would be pretty much all the same. Every week I would get the same story with, perhaps, a few slight variations. It's the adventure of dipping into thousands of letters at random, and picking one out by chance, that appeals to me. It's a privilege not given to many men, and it's one that I appreciate and cherish."

He was silent for a moment, while Tommy replenished his cup again.

"You know, Tommy," he continued, "sometimes when I look at the letters I get they seem to turn into faces—yearning, eager, dreaming faces. Some of them are beautiful, some of them seem ugly, but all of them seemed to be filled with seeking and desire. It is not me they want, I know that, because they seem to look right through and beyond me. It is an ideal they have created in their own minds they crave—an ideal that no man born could satisfy."

"That's easy to explain," asserted Tommy pompously. "A writer like me creates an heroic rôle in which you appear. These dumb janes see you play the part and they think you're just the kind of a guy they see in the story on the screen. That's all there is to it."

"It's something like that, I guess," Rod conceded.

"It's just like that, I tell you," Tommy insisted. "If these bimbos who write letters to you knew that you kept six apartments, more or less, and had the habit of giving your friends the go-by whenever you feel like it, they'd stop writing pronto."

"Well, I hope they don't stop writing," replied Rod, "because it would sort of take the zest out of life if I couldn't fare forth into some unknown adventure once in awhile."

"I can't see any sense to that," grumbled Tommy; "but maybe that's because I'm not romantic."

"You probably never will see any sense to it, Tommy," Rod agreed, "so what's the use of trying. As for me, I never want to get through rubbing elbows with life, and this is one way in which I accomplish it. You seem to be satisfied to sit back and tipple and write hokum. Some day you're going to run out of liquor and ideas at the same time, and then you will be a mess. But I'm going to keep on living and learning through these adventures at random of mine."

"Talking about ideas," remarked Tommy, "that is one of the reasons I made a dash for Washington Square to-night. You've got a pretty good head, Rod, and you can come through with a suggestion once in awhile, which is more than I can say for Kenyon, that dumb director of yours. Say!" he exploded, "if you ask me, that guy couldn't direct traffic at the old crossroads. It's a good thing I'm working against him or you would be ruined, plumb ruined."

Tommy took a sip of Tom and Jerry, and Rod, turning his head as if reaching for a match, smiled. Tommy's indignation always amused him. While at other times they were the best of friends, a fierce feud always broke out between Tommy and Kenyon when the preparation of a new story began.

"Kenyon and I had dinner together to-night at the Lambs," Tommy explained. "I'm whipping that next story of yours into shape, you know, and that guy, as usual, thinks he has to butt in and know all about it. Say, if he would pay more attention to his own work and let me do mine everybody would be better off."

"Well," said Rod, placatingly, "it's just as well to listen to his suggestions. Anybody has a good idea now and then."

"Listen!" ejaculated Tommy. "Say, I listened to-night for two hours, and, believe me, I didn't hear a thing—nothing at all." Then Tommy beamed. "Anyway, I licked him on most of the points we went to the mat on—all except one."

He paused to give his cup due attention for a moment.

"You know in this new story you're supposed to be a guy from a small town, who leaves his girl behind him to come to New York to make a fortune. Well, you get to town and get tangled up with one of these slick city flappers who is all for herself. There's a real lifelike type," Tommy explained, "that city girl. Most of them are just that way."

He furrowed his brow a bit and then looked seriously at Rod.

"I hear," he went on, "that they're going to put Rosie Redd in that part. You shouldn't stand for it, Rod—you shouldn't stand for it. That girl's got a shape like a grandfather's clock, and just about as much pep. She'll ruin the picture. That's some more of Kenyon's work. That zany's stuck on Rosie, which only goes to show what a picture eye he hasn't got."

He paused a moment and then sniffed. "Rosie Redd!" he ejaculated. "I remember when she came up from the East Side as an extra and now she thinks she's the peacock's tail."

"I thought that you sort of liked Rosie yourself at one time, Tommy," Rod remarked with a smile. Tommy glared at him.

"Who said so?" he demanded. "Who said so?"

"It seems to me I used to hear you rave about her Titian hair and her pearly teeth and—"

"Well, anyway, about that story," Tommy interrupted. "You're crazy about this city girl—some one like Rosie, who, at that, is just the type—and there's got to be some influence come into your life to bring you to your senses and send you back to the girl out in Arkansas or Idaho, or wherever you came from."

He paused a moment, and then hitched forward.

"Say," he asked, his eyes flashing, "can you imagine what Kenyon insists on?"

Rod shook his head.

"He wants to pull the old Cinderella gag again, and have you come in contact with some poor but honest working girl whose unselfishness and self-sacrifice will

bring you to your senses. He wants you to meet her at a masquerade, so you can do some of your dancing stuff. Say, when he pulled that one I made so much noise that they thought John McGraw was in again."

Tommy chuckled as he recalled the incident.

"I told Kenyon," he continued, "that his idea was old stuff, and asked him how his Cinderella would look sitting in front of a gas stove or a radiator. Then Kenyon got sort of sore, and said that he had let me have my way on everything else, and that he was going to have his way as far as Cinderella was concerned. He said he didn't care if she sat in front of a cook stove or a subway express—she was going to be in the picture anyway."

Tommy paused again, and looked a little serious. "Say, that guy's built like a pyramid—the higher up he goes the less he's got. And I couldn't budge him as far as his goofy Cinderella idea went. Finally, just to satisfy him, I had to tell him that I would do what I could with the suggestion."

He took another drink and sniffed disdainfully.

"That Kenyon's got a pumpkin head, and that's why the Cinderella stuff popped out of it," he hazarded.

Roderick Randall leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for moment as he considered the point at issue. In a quiet way he influenced the stories in which he appeared to an extent greater than any one realized. His sense of artistry, his unflagging interest in life, were reflected to a certain degree in all of the silent dramas in which he was featured.

While he tried to search out the vital element in the dispute between Kenyon and Tommy, the latter, recognizing the mood of Rod, maintained his silence.

"Do you know, Tommy," Rod said at last, "I believe that both you and Kenyon are right in your argument, each to a certain extent at least. I don't believe that Kenyon expressed himself clearly, or that you understood quite what he was trying to get at. I believe that he mentioned Cinderella merely as a symbol of the type of

girl he thought should be injected into the story. Then you razzed him so hard that you made him nervous, and he couldn't explain what he meant."

"I razzed him, all right," Tommy said grimly, with his nasal twang.

"I don't believe," continued Rod, "that Kenyon meant that you should follow literally the story of Cinderella, or even that you should keep very close to it. That has been done too many times, and even Kenyon is aware of this. He meant, I believe, to use a girl of the Cinderella type, but to get some new angle on the old story. Possibly he thought the masked ball would add a picturesque touch to the production, but even that, of course, is not essential."

"Aw!" grunted Tommy. "What's the use of dragging in fairy stories? Why don't he say what he means?"

Rod considered a moment.

"Cinderella isn't exactly a fairy story, Tommy," he said. "It is far more than that. Cinderella herself typifies any girl who is poor and unattractive, but who, nevertheless, has her dreams of romance. They are all around us, Tommy, but the fairy prince never comes to most of them."

"Then, what Kenyon means," Tommy rejoined, "is to put some down and out young dame in the story as a contrast to that flashy Broadway butterfly which will be played by the aforementioned Rosie Redd."

Rod nodded.

"That's about it," he conceded. "See what you can do with the suggestion and I will give it some thought myself. Then we'll get together in a few days and see if we can work out something original and appealing."

Tommy tipped up his bowl and got about a half cup full of liquor.

"Well," he remarked, "the flowing bowl has flown, and I guess I'll fly after it."

He drained the mug, and, smacking his lips, rose to his feet.

"Hi there, Foo," he shouted. "Bring me my great coat."

Foo responded instantly, and Tommy was soon securely buttoned up and buried in the depths of ulster, muffler, hat, and gloves.

"I'll send you home in my car if you want to wait until the chauffeur can bring it around," volunteered Rod.

But Tommy would have none of this.

"No, sir!" he replied. "If I wanted a car I would call my own. I only came down in a cab because I happened to be at the Lambs, and didn't want to rout Wiggins out on a night like this."

"But, from now on, I'm going to use taxicabs until I find that pirate who robbed me to-night," he asserted with a fierce glare. "I'll happen on him some day, and when I do, I'll throw him out of his seat and run over him with his own cheap bus."

With that, and a parting handshake, he waddled toward the door after Foo. He paused midway between the portières and turned to Rod.

"Take my advice and hand pick one," he said, indicating the letters on the table. "This sentimental stuff never gets any one anywhere." Then he disappeared, and a moment later, Rod heard the door close after him.

II.

Rod smiled rather fondly as he turned to the straight backed chair by the old refectory table and slumped down into it. What an odd and lovable fellow Tommy was! The most impractical and sentimental of all men, he tried to assume an air of great practicality.

A friend who would sacrifice everything for any one he knew, he gruffly and impartially knocked every one of his associates. A writer who loudly proclaimed his contempt for anything but hokum and box office stuff, he had the aspirations and soul of a lyric poet.

Every gesture Tommy made, every word he spoke, seemed expressly designed to conceal his own innate goodness.

Rod then turned his thoughtful eyes to the envelopes before him, and prepared to draw one from the heap. Once a week he gathered together the letters which came to him in such great quantities, and once a week, at random, he would pick one communication from the thousands he received. And, one evening a week, he would fare forth to keep an appointment with some

one he had never known or seen before.

For months he had been doing this, and many strange and illuminating experiences had resulted from his ventures out into life. Always, however, he hesitated almost involuntarily before plunging his hand into the letters to draw one forth.

There, before him, they lay, and the thought, as always, came to him that each one of them might be compared to a mysterious sealed door, opening upon some pathway that ran far out into life. It might lead up, it might lead down; it might pass through goodness or dally through evil; it might be fraught with danger or it might be quiet and peaceful.

Which path would chance set his feet upon, and where would it lead him? He closed his eyes, and then, brushing letters aside until he was deep in the heart of the pile, he drew one out.

He held it up to the light and looked at it curiously for a moment, and then, tearing it open, he sat down by the hearth and read it by the light of the flames. He smiled a little as he finished the inclosure, and then, rising hastily, went to the window and looked out. A taxicab was drawing up to the corner, apparently in response to a hail from the corpulent, muffled figure standing there under a light in the driving snow.

Rod stepped back into the room and sounded the gong, and then went to the window again. He saw the man below looking into the front of the cab as if scrutinizing the driver, and then, as if satisfied with his inspection, step inside.

"Never mind, Foo," said Rod, when his servant appeared in the studio. "I wanted to get Mr. Corbin back, but it's too late."

Foo inclined his head slightly, and retired as silently as he had entered, while Roderick Randall let the curtains fall together and walked back to his seat by the fireplace. He drew the letter from the envelope, and, reading it through once more, replaced it and laid it on the mantel.

Then again he called Foo, and, when the servant appeared, he pointed to the table with its burden of mail.

"Take those and destroy them, Foo," he ordered.

"Doors that never will be opened, paths that I never will follow," thought Rod, a little regretfully, as he watched his man gather them up.

III.

It was some minutes before ten o'clock when Roderick Randall, in a Pierrot costume, found himself in the garishly decorated and dimly lighted dance hall. He had looked at his timepiece, and, discovering that he was a little early for his appointment, he had paused for a moment by the great arched entrance to the ballroom and watched the scene before him.

They glided past, in the subdued light, masked figures most incongruously coupled. A swaggering pirate, sashed with a red scarf, great golden earrings dangling against his cheeks, went by with a slender and fragile appearing Columbine. A courtier of the time of Elizabeth, ornately attired, glided along with a lithe, dark-haired girl who might have stepped out of the plaza of some little Spanish town.

Other couples, seemingly an endless procession, whirled into view in the half light, only to vanish among the varicolored merry-makers who thronged the floor.

The languid waltz, which an orchestra had been playing, melted into silence, and the dancers drifted from the center of the hall. Then the band struck up a provocative fox trot, and the floor became crowded again with lithesome bodies, swaying and turning in response to the barbaric rhythm of the music. Rod glanced once more at his watch.

"At the head of the stairs leading up to the balcony," he murmured to himself as he made his way through the jostling and laughing masqueraders who were lingering outside of the rail which separated the dance floor from the promenade.

More than one fair face turned to follow him as he wove his way toward his destination, and once, as he was momentarily halted by the throng, he heard a girl behind him speak.

"He looks like Roderick Randall," she said. "but, of course, it can't be."

He was smiling as he reached the foot of the broad staircase. He was thinking that the world at large knew very little about the real Roderick Randall.

The stairs to the balcony, like every other part of the dance hall, were crowded, and, as he slowly made his way up them, he kept his eye on the landing above. It was just as he reached it that a slender girl in a Pierrette costume appeared and paused for a moment.

She was twirling a red rose in the white fingers of her left hand, and, seeing this, Rod approached her.

"Are you alone?" he asked, with a little smile.

"I was," she replied, "but now I no longer am."

Her voice trembled, and seemed a little rough, but this he attributed to her nervousness or to the impassive mask which entirely concealed her face. He knew that she was the girl with whom he had made an appointment, because the rose, and even the romantic little passwords, had been agreed upon before.

"Come," he said, "we will sit down and get acquainted with each other."

She took his arm, and he sensed her agitation as he led her to a secluded part of the balcony.

"I never expected you to come," she began, when they were seated. "I really thought that you were just playing with me."

"To disappoint a person never would be my idea of play," he told her reprovingly.

"No, I guess not," she conceded. "But it's often done just the same."

There was a little note of bitterness in her voice, and, for a moment, there was silence between them. As they sat there, Rod tried to determine, from their brief contact, what sort of a girl his companion was.

"She's not a brainless flapper, anyway," he thought, "or she would be gushing all over me."

Then he turned to her.

"Tell me," he said, "why you are so careful to keep your face hidden from me. I am wearing only a domino, and, it seems to me, you are wearing a whole set of domi-

noes." He paused a moment: "I seem to trust you more than you trust me."

"Oh, it's not that," she replied, impulsively clutching his arm. "It's not that at all. Just please don't ask me—please don't spoil it all."

"Of course I won't," he assured her. "I wouldn't spoil anything for anybody. We won't say another word about your mask. Just you have a good time any way you want to. Suppose we dance?"

"Yes," she agreed, "let's dance."

They made their way down to the floor and passed through the gate, where he left two tickets he had torn from the long strip he had bought. It was a jazz fox trot that the band was playing, a rhythmic and sensuous number, and the girl was swaying to the lilt of it even before Rod took her into his arms.

Among his many other talents, Roderick Randall had the gift of dancing. Music seemed to take possession of him, and his response to it was unconscious, unerring. The dance was a passion with him, but it was seldom that he enjoyed it, because it was seldom that he found a girl whose skill and grace approached his own.

But the moment they moved out on the floor, he knew that his partner was no neophyte. Their bodies seemed to flow and undulate together, responding in perfect unison to the music.

Not a word was uttered between them until the number, with a resounding crash of brass, suddenly ceased. Even then they stood for a moment as if entranced, so completely had they abandoned themselves to the dance.

Then the girl laughed a bit nervously and took his arm.

"Come," she said, "we're almost alone on the floor."

He breathed rather deeply and looked at her with wonder in his eyes.

"That was superb," he murmured. "It was marvelous! You must dance a great deal."

"No," she told him, "I hardly ever dance, but when I do, it's always the same. I love it so," she added passionately, "that I hardly know where I am when I'm dancing."

Then, in a voice that was dull and rebellious, she complained: "And yet I hardly ever go out—I don't get the chance."

They went back to the balcony in silence, and, seated there, she asked him if he would get her a glass of water.

"Of course I will," he told her. "I'm sorry I didn't think of it myself. Perhaps you would like some lemonade better?"

"Whatever you think," she agreed, and he went downstairs to the refreshment bar. This was thronged with thirsty dancers, and it was several moments before he was served. He found his companion waiting patiently, however, when he reached the balcony, and he apologized for the delay.

"Please don't worry about that," she begged him. "It was awfully good of you to bring this to me."

Her voice seemed more reliant and less inclined to tremble than before, and he was glad that the girl was regaining her confidence. The orchestra below broke out into a jazz melody, and he turned expectantly to the girl.

"Suppose we sit this dance out?" she suggested, somewhat to his disappointment.

"If you are tired," he said, "just stay here and rest. But you dance so wonderfully that I really hate to miss one number."

"It's not that," she explained. "Of course I'm not tired. But sometimes I love to sit and listen to the music, especially to a band playing jazz."

"But why not dance and listen to the music at the same time?" he suggested.

"Because," she replied earnestly, "when you dance you can't hear the music—that is, you can't really hear it. You have to listen carefully to hear music; to sit apart from it and do nothing else."

Then she added, after hesitating a moment: "In just the same way, I think, you have to be away from life to see it and understand it."

Rod looked at the girl curiously. Decidedly she was no mindless, thoughtless, habitué of a dance hall.

"You are somewhat of a philosopher, then, as well as a gorgeous dancer," he said soberly. "Somehow you are rather surprising and puzzling to me to-night."

"I read and thought, and thought and read for a long time," she admitted, "and I guess that rather influenced me."

She leaned forward for a moment, and was very silent.

"Listen," she said. "Do you hear it?" He looked at her questioningly.

"The melody, I mean," she explained. He turned his head to catch it, and, for a moment, was intent on the music.

"The clarinets are playing it now," she went on. "And now," she added, "it's gone into a minor key, and the trumpets have taken it up."

They sat without speaking for a moment, each listening to the music, following the ever-shifting, ever-recurring melody.

"Oh, there has to be melody in music," she finally said passionately. "They can conceal it in chords and discords, they can tangle it up in changing keys, but always it is there if you listen for it."

"It's rather like life," he told her earnestly. "There's a comparison there somewhere."

"That's what I was going to say," she took him up eagerly. "Life, too, has its chords and discords, its shifting keys, and its harmony. But through it all there runs a strain of beauty, of love, of unselfishness, without which there would be no life."

"That's true," he admitted, "but why, at twenty, even think about it. There will be time enough for you to wonder about life when you get older. All you should do now is dance, dance, dance."

"Yes," she replied shortly, "that's what I should do, but I don't."

Then, with a little laugh, she added apologetically: "I've talked so much and so fast that I am thirsty. I wonder if you would get me a glass of water."

Again he suggested lemonade or an ice, but they did not seem to appeal to her. He made his way through the crowd, and was back at her side in a few moments.

"See," he said, as he seated himself, "am I not thoughtful? Because you insisted that you must not remove your mask, I brought you some straws."

"By that kindness," she replied, "you almost tempt me to give you a glimpse of my face."

"Please!" Rod pleaded.

"A little later, perhaps," she temporized. She extended her hand for the water, but when he passed the glass to her she only half grasped it and part of the fluid spilled on her costume.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with a frightened little gasp. "It's this mask. I can't see very well through it."

She sipped the water with apparent relish and handed the emptied glass back to him. The orchestra was playing a waltz and the sensual and lovely music came drifting up to the balcony.

"Come," he said. "I want to see if you waltz as well as you fox trot."

The girl drew back.

"Not this dance," she said. "We will have the next one. I'd rather just sit here and talk with you." She hurried on, as if fearing to give him an opportunity to plead with her. "They say you're just wonderful," she breathed.

"Well, what do *you* think of me?" he asked her, half-humorously. "I am more interested in your opinion right now than in the opinion of others."

"Oh, I think so, too," she told him. "But I've never seen you on the screen because I don't go to pictures."

"Then how in the world did you happen to write to me?" he asked. Here was something to wonder at.

"Oh, well—that is—" she stammered, "I heard the other girls talk so much about you that I just thought I would send you that letter. You didn't mind, did you?"

There was a childish and appealing timbre to her voice that he had not noticed before.

"I would love to see you, though," she told him, breaking in on his contemplation.

"And I would love to see you," he replied.

"Then, look!" she said hastily, drawing her mask from her face and darting a glance at him from the corners of her eyes.

Roderick Randall had seen many desirable girls, but never a face as beautiful as this one. The mask slipped back into place and, for a moment, he maintained his silence.

"If I try to tell you how lovely you

are," he said then, softly, "it will sound like a lot of nonsense. So I'm not going to try. But," he added earnestly, "who in the world are you? That I must know before the evening is over."

"I'm no one in particular," she replied in a tremulous whisper. "No one at all. But it's nice to have you think I'm—lovely."

"You have become more and more lovely from the moment I met you," he assured her. "You're almost too wonderful to be real."

"Maybe I'm not real," she warned him. "But, anyway, if you think I'm so wonderful," she added softly and whimsically, "you may bring me a lemonade. Then we will have the next dance together."

Rod hastened away, thinking of the exquisite face he had glimpsed for a moment in the shadow of the mask. Here was a girl, he thought, who was different. Then he smiled at the idea that he could fall into the error of thinking that any woman was, or could be, different from any other woman.

But, nevertheless, she *was* different. His heart, to his confusion, protested vigorously against the cynicism of his mind.

Just as he reached her again the band struck into the opening measure of "La Paloma."

"I don't want the drink," she said hastily. "Put it down somewhere. We must dance this tango."

She fairly flew ahead of him and then they were on the floor dancing. She danced as she had before and her verve and abandon thrilled Rod like old wine.

The music stopped suddenly.

"Oh!" the girl half-sobbed. "More," she said, "more!"

Again the seductive strains and broken rhythm of the Spanish air pulsed through the hall and once more they became a part of the very music itself. Again the band stopped and, after a moment, resumed.

Rod became aware of the fact that the crowd on the floor was thinning out and at last he realized that he and his partner were competing in a tango contest. This, then, was why she had wanted so particularly to dance the number with him.

She was clinging to him as they stood there but, the moment the music started, she swept into his arms and they were off again. There were only a few couples on the floor and Rod became conscious of the fact that the applause of the onlookers was all for himself and his partner.

It bothered him a little because he knew that he and the girl would be awarded prizes and that they would have to unmask to receive them. He, of course, would be recognized without his domino, and there probably would be stories in the papers, which, under the circumstances, would be rather undesirable publicity.

But, nevertheless, he decided to play the game through with the girl. After all, in spite of her charm and beauty, she probably was only some notoriety-seeking little dancer who had deliberately trapped him into the situation. But he would give her the benefit of the doubt until he knew.

At last they were left on the floor together and, for a few moments, the great hand played for them alone.

Then, in response to the beckoning hand of the master of ceremonies, he walked forward toward a platform, the girl clinging to his arm.

"Is it all over?" she whispered in a husky voice.

"Yes," he told her, "we've won the contest."

"We've what?" she asked in amazement.

"Won the contest," he repeated. "They are going to award us the prizes, and we have got to unmask."

Her grip on his arm tightened convulsively.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and her voice was faint with fright. "I didn't know—I didn't understand!"

"It's all right, my dear," he told her. "I'll be quite proud to unmask with you by my side."

"No!" she said frantically. "No! I won't do it! Take me out. I don't want the prize. I won't unmask!"

"If you feel that way, it's all right," he assured her softly. "Just be quiet. Everything is all right. Just wait for me a moment."

He stepped forward and whispered to

the master of ceremonies and then turned back to the girl.

"Come," he said, "we will go back to the balcony."

As they moved across the floor he heard the voice of the announcer stating that the winners of the first prize preferred to relinquish the honor rather than reveal their identities.

As they reached their seats the soft chimes of a clock struck twelve.

"Let's go now," the girl suggested to Rod. "It's been wonderful—too wonderful—and, if we stay, something might happen to spoil it."

"All right, Cinderella," he replied cheerfully. "I would like to dance some more, but this is your party. Get your wraps and we'll go out and hop into the pumpkin."

IV.

THE car was threading its way through the heavy traffic that flows through the Forties at midnight.

"You can let me off at Park Avenue and Fifty-fifth Street," the girl told Rod. "Then I will be almost home."

"And you're not going to give me even one more glimpse of that lovely face?" he teased.

"One more glimpse?" she asked.

"Yes—one more," he said.

"No," she told him. "You never will see my face again. Just remember it as you saw it."

"I'll have to remember you," he replied, "as a masked enchantress."

A taxicab rounding a corner skidded into the middle of the street and crashed against the car in which they were riding. The girl screamed and involuntarily tore the mask from her face. Rod, shaken up but uninjured, looked at her in horror.

For it was a drawn and scarred and twisted face that he looked at, one that had been ravaged by fire.

"You—you're—not the girl I met tonight!" he exclaimed in amazement. "What has happened—where is she?" he asked.

Her voice became hard and bitter for a moment and she looked at him with blazing eyes.

"Yes, I'm the girl, and that's the truth," she said. "But this Park Avenue stuff is bunk," she said. "If you want to drive me down to Seventh Avenue and Houston Street I'll be very near home." Then the tears came welling into her eyes and she leaned over and sobbed convulsively.

V.

"All right, all right—you won't take my advice, so, of course, you get stung proper." This from Tommy Corbin a few nights later as he sat in Roderick Randall's Washington Square apartment. "You think you're with a sweet mamma and just find out by accident that the girl with you has got a face like a dish of scrambled eggs. All right, all right—I can't do anything for you."

"But wait a minute, Tommy," rejoined Rod. "I haven't finished the story yet and I think it's worth listening to. We'll call the girl Molly and I've told you all about her up to the time she took off her mask in the car when the taxicab hit it."

"But there's one thing you haven't told me," objected Tommy. "You said you got a close-up flash of her in the balcony and that she looked like a dream."

"Just wait a minute, Tommy, and you'll understand why," said Rod. "Molly lives in a furnished room on Houston Street on the West Side. If you've ever been down there, you know what that means. And her nerves are tuned to music and her mind, like those of most pleasure-starved girls, is filled with romance. She could go to movies because, in the dark, her pitiful face could not be seen and it was there, of course, that she fell in love with her conception of me."

He was silent a moment, then continued:

"It was her letter that I picked out of that mail piled on the table the last time you were here. At first when she received my reply, she was actually frightened, and then she grimly decided to go through with the affair in a masquerade costume. She would have one glorious night and then go back into her darkness with something to remember.

"But Molly, it seems, lives with two other girls whom we will call Dolly and Polly. They were just three waifs, doomed from childhood to despair, who had somehow drifted together. They lived the lives of drudges, and you can imagine the excitement when my reply was received.

"Molly sort of takes care of the other two. She likes to watch over them and mother them and protect them like children. So she decided, of course, that they must go with her and share her romance."

Tommy had become strangely silent for him, and was listening intently to the story.

"So they fashioned three costumes just alike," continued Rod, "and then went early to the masquerade. It was Molly who met me at the head of the stairs and with whom I had the first dance. Then, remember, after she took me back to the balcony, she wanted a drink and I had to go downstairs. She slipped out of her seat while I was gone and Dolly took her place. She, you know, was the one who had such faith in love and beauty and who found the symbol of truth even in the music of a jazz band. Then she sent me downstairs again and Polly took her place—Polly who admitted that she had never even seen me."

"And then—" Tommy asked.

"Only this," Rod said. "Dolly was a cripple, which was why she had read and thought and thought and read, and Polly, with a face like an angel and a voice like music, was blind."

Both men were silent for a moment and then Tommy sniffed vigorously and wiped his eyes with a great handkerchief.

"Who said I was crying?" he asked indignantly, as though he had heard Rod accuse him. "You don't think I'd shed a tear at that story, do you? What did you tell it to me for, anyway?"

"I thought, perhaps, that if you needed a Cinderella for that scenario, you might be able to use the story of Molly."

Tommy brightened up.

"You said it, kid!" he exclaimed. "That will just turn the trick. Say, where is that Molly? I could kiss her homely face."

"I did kiss her," said Rod, "but to me she seemed beautiful."

THE END



The Mark of the Moccasin

A MYSTERY TALE

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "Wild Paradise," "The Canon of Light," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II

JOE BOSTWICK has the habit of writing whenever he is nervous. When he becomes involved in the uncanny Judge Scudder murder mystery his nerves become so frayed that he turns out a manuscript as long as a book. The sheriff hands it to the district attorney as testimony in the case. Bostwick's report tells of his arrival at the Scudder manse near the Sabine River as escort to Miss Shirley Scudder, the judge's stepdaughter, and how he, his friend, Tim Cronk, the eccentric photographer; the coroner, Dr. Zobel; a deputy sheriff; and an old negro soothsayer stay at the lonely manse with Miss Shirley Scudder, Maizie, the octoroom housekeeper, and Pasqual, the old Mexican hostler. Judge Scudder had been entombed three weeks before. However, on the second night footsteps resembling the judge's are heard, and a body is dropped down a three-story staircase. When lights are lit, the body has disappeared; and the deputy sheriff and the soothsayer are missing.

CHAPTER XI (*Continued*).

THE VANISHED VICTIM.

CRONK answered characteristically. Uncertain, bewildered, obsessed with his claptrap of spiritualism, he could not carry his theories out of the realm of religious fervor into the domain of logic:

"The judge may have murdered a victim purely because he was possessed of a devil, and was liberated from the bonds of the grave to commit an act, no matter how gruesome, and purposeless. The dead need no motives in the sense that we use that term."

The doctor and I, needless to say, would

listen to no such tomfoolery as this. If we admitted, or rather supposed for the sake of argument, that the judge had felled a victim, then it was paramount to find his motive for so doing. We argued along those lines, and came to this conclusion:

Of the group in the house there were two who were not at present in our circle: the deputy and Pythagoras Awls, the soothsayer. The doctor and I stuck to the thesis that the deputy had killed Pythagoras Awls.

Cronk and the mozo, Pasqual, stuck to their theory that the judge had returned to earth, and had killed some one by leaping from the upper gallery of the house to the floor of the hall, and crushing his victim to death. Who the victim was neither Cronk nor the mozo dared to say. They seemed afraid to analyze the motives, either good or evil, of the dead.

"If the deputy had been found down here on the floor crushed," I said, "I would be inclined to give your preposterous theory some consideration. Heaven knows the judge must have borne a grudge against him—beyond the grave."

The answer to this enigma came soon enough. We found out which theory was true.

The superstitious Mexican "breed" and the imaginative, emotional Cronk were right!

I am able to write now, that I believe implicitly something which you would say no sane man could believe: The judge has walked. He leaped upon a hapless mortal from the top of that stair well, and crushed him to the earth.

But now for the motive:

I discovered the motive long before the crime. Or rather it was the doctor who—through his long friendship with the Scudder family—was enabled to discover it.

Miss Shirley had confided in him, telling him everything. She herself had from the very first—three weeks ago—believed that her stepfather had been murdered, and that he had been murdered by Deputy Marteau. But she had no proof.

She was at first violently opposed to an inquest. The disgrace, the publicity was abhorrent to her sensitive and cultured nature. Her resolution was to bide her time.

But for all that, she spent a very restless three weeks in her home. She could not confide in her housekeeper, whom she despised, and who hated her. She could not confide in the mozo, for she believed he was in some way implicated.

She even suspected in her distress that her one friend in the world, Dr. Zobel, had in some way or other, perhaps against his wishes, connived in the crime.

She loved Dr. Zobel, and she wanted to protect him. It was one of the reasons why she did not press an investigation. She believed that Dr. Zobel had made some terrible mistake. Then came the night of the hurricane, when she decided to call Dr. Zobel to the house.

Upon finding that I was a respected member of the community she decided, "against her better judgment," as she said to the doctor, to invite me to stay in her house. She wanted some one else beside the mozo and the untrustworthy Maizie to be in her house in case Deputy Marteau visited her again.

Then came Deputy Marteau. Believing as she did that he was the man who had killed her stepfather, and that he was ruthless in his designs upon her, she became terrified, helpless in her fear, as a bird before the advance of a snake.

And this was the crux of her confession: Deputy Marteau had pressed his suit. She had repulsed him, accused him, maddened him. He had actually taken her in his arms, and in a moment of baffled rage had lost control of himself enough to tussle with her.

She fought him off. He regained his composure and turned, she said, into a far more dangerous animal. He became canny, threatening, suave, all at the same time.

He said he would help her in her extremity, ferret out the murderer of her stepfather, and stand by her; but he stipulated she must hold her tongue about the scene that had taken place between them.

I fancy that he realized well enough that if the countryside knew that he had made this ungentlemanly—no, this brutal—at-attack upon the Scudder girl, he would be lynched. He even threatened that she would better hold her tongue or she would

"pay for it!" Believing as she did that he was a ruthless man, a murderer, she was more terrified than ever.

The deputy left her in her room, and came out to us, giving no indication whatsoever of what had passed within that room. Later on in the day, when she was assured that he had left the house, the girl herself, as you will remember, came out. But she had been too dazed even to rearrange her hair, or her torn shirtwaist. You remember that she would not divulge what had happened.

I remember how Maizie had smiled at this whole proceeding. I can never forget that smile. Maizie knew. She had no doubt about what had taken place. The affair actually amused her!

The doctor related this whole report to Cronk and me in private. It was the motive for what had happened that night. The judge, in whatever bedeviled state his spirit was in, had returned to earth to wreak justice and vengeance.

While we were conferring, Maizie was fixing up the hall, as was her early morning custom. The mozo was outside tending the old horse. Both the domestics were now free. There was no longer any conceivable reason why we should guard them as prisoners, now that we had discovered who it was that should have been arrested.

The result of our conference was somewhat in doubt. Cronk was for reporting the whole matter now to the police. But the doctor, again considering Shirley's aversion to a public scandal above all else, was for waiting until we found some evidence of what had happened the preceding night. We must find the old Negro, Pythagoras Awls, and we must also find the body of Judge Scudder.

"*That* will be in its grave in the morning," Cronk said.

To tell you the truth, neither the doctor nor I really questioned for a single moment but that the body would have returned, as the night fled, to its proper resting place. But we two doubting Thomases—the doctor and myself—wanted to see.

I myself went to the St. Roche Gardens to the Scudder tomb, and without any sur-

prise on my part at the discovery, or surprise on the part of the two to whom I later told the news, I made my announcement:

"The judge is in his grave."

This news seemed absolutely trivial to us. No one offered a word of comment. For one reason it was, as I say, just what we had expected. For a second reason, there was another bit of news of considerably more importance:

The mozo in letting the old horse out into a field beyond the corral, which sloped down to the nearest bayou, had made a discovery.

He had found a sombrero in the broom rape near the bayou. He recognized it to be the sombrero of Deputy Marteau.

He observed that there was a small amount of blood inside the crown which, however, had not soaked through the felt.

He searched in the broom rape, and tules, and along the bayou shore, and there came upon the body of Deputy Marteau almost completely hidden in the purple hyacinths of the water. Probably at an earlier time during the night the hyacinths had effectually covered him, but the body had subsequently floated upward; and was therefore discovered.

There were two black dots on the neck at the base of the skull.

CHAPTER XII.

COTTONMOUTHS.

THE mozo's discovery threw only the faintest light upon the mystery. It left many questions unanswered: Where was the deputy killed? How was he killed? If he had been thrown over that banister, just how was it done? And who did it? Furthermore, just who had the deputy gone upstairs to see? The answer to this last question was the most important of all.

In fact, we considered that if we could have found that answer the whole mystery would be solved.

But we were mistaken. Shirley Scudder found the answer, and it only served to mystify us all the more.

She had made a careful examination of her own of the hall floor, the staircase, and everything in the hall.

"What puzzled me," she said to the doctor and Cronk and me, "is just how the deputy's body could have been got out, after his fall, without either you, doctor, or you, Mr. Cronk, or I myself seeing what was happening. The only possible solution is this: The body must have been hidden temporarily in the hall—"

"Where?" the doctor asked.

"I thought of that window seat," she said, pointing to a large Gothic chest underneath one of the windows. "And I examined it."

We agreed that the murderer might have had time in the few moments before we all came upon the scene to drag the body in that chest, and then leap through the window to the darkness of the patio outside.

"You say you examined the chest?" I asked.

"Yes. Deputy Marteau's body was hidden there last night."

We all stared in surprise.

"I found a paper which had slipped out of his pocket. Here it is."

The doctor took it and read it.

It was just the beginning of a telegram which Shirley had checked up as being written in Deputy Marteau's handwriting. It was addressed to the sheriff of Jefferson County.

"Murderer of Judge Scudder found," it began. Evidently Deputy Marteau had not had time to send it in, or had thought better of sending it before making the arrest. He came to the house to make the arrest just before he was killed. *"Confession made by Negro Awls, an accomplice—"*

That was all. And I must say that it only led us into a blind alley.

But for some peculiar reason Miss Shirley Scudder considered the whole hideous business closed. The deputy was killed; there was an end of it. The deputy, in her opinion, had killed Judge Scudder. The judge, restive in his grave, had arisen by some strange power to avenge his own death. Now that he was arisen he would no longer walk "the glimpses of the moor." He would rest in peace.

But from the point of view of the others the case was by no means solved. Suppose we were still too hard-shelled to believe that a ghost could arise from the grave and avenge himself. Well, then, who killed the deputy?

"Have you thought of Pythagoras Awls?" I asked.

Yes, there was a question, indeed! Where was Pythagoras Awls, the Negro fakir? How had he escaped? What had his secret been? Why had he forsaken us in the dead of night?

These were the questions that gripped us all. All, that is to say, except Cronk and the mozo who thought them entirely irrelevant. They were interested only in the judge's ghost.

The Mexican mozo, in fact, announced to us all that he was sure that the judge would come back again after sunset. Some one else would be "chosen."

The mozo did not have any interest in motives. He did not know what the word meant. Cronk knew what it meant, but he did not consider it important in the Life Beyond; the judge might come back.

In fact, Cronk affirmed that he again felt in his bones that there would be more manifestations. The old house was haunted. It would always be haunted from the day Judge Scudder died up in that old bed-chamber until it was burned to the ground.

Cronk went on to explain to us that there had been no visible manifestation, no materialized spirit, for the simple reason that there had been too much conflict in the house. He alluded to the intense conflict between Miss Shirley and the deputy.

But now that the deputy was gone he was inclined to think the atmosphere would be more conducive to a manifestation, that is to say, one which would be visible to some of us.

There had been enough of a manifestation the preceding night, Heaven knows, but our eyes were blind.

Spirits appear to mortal eyes only under certain conditions. A very common condition, for instance, is that which obtains when a group of people are seated about a table in a passive state.

In this connection he reminded us of the

vivid materialization of the judge back there in the Lone Star Hotel. A group of men were seated about a table. They were playing cards, but they had been playing for a long time, and being traveling salesmen who spent much time at this pursuit, they were used to playing more or less automatically.

Cronk and I, furthermore, were sitting there in the lobby with our minds a blank after our trip from Galveston. There was a storm outside; the atmosphere was electric. The whole situation was conducive to psychic phenomena.

I took this process of reasoning, more or less, with a grain of salt, and said so.

Cronk flushed.

"I'd like to prove a thing or two to you skeptical gentlemen," he said. "It is something that I've long wanted to prove, but never yet have I had the opportunity that this haunted house affords. I want to take some spirit photographs."

The doctor laughed. I myself could scarcely hold back a smile at the thought of bringing a camera into a scene of such vital and serious complexity as this one. A camera suggested the hocus pocus of Pythagoras Awls. The Negro, Awls, with his bag of skulls, and stuffed gila monsters, and dead alligators, was just about as impressive as a camera.

But Cronk would not be scoffed at. He had delved somewhat in spirit photography in the past, but without success. He had shown me prints of photographs taken by others who were more adept at the business—and I believe less ingenuous.

To the gullible these pictures were very impressive. They were the dim outlines of hands, or heads, or full-length forms of ghosts hovering over the members of a seance. Of course, I never considered them as anything beyond tricks in putting together two negatives.

"I wish Mr. Cronk would bring his camera."

You will be surprised when I tell you that it was Miss Shirley who made this remark.

And yet, why was it so surprising? She had quite obviously come to the conclusion that her stepfather had walked again upon

the earth. What more natural than that she should be fascinated by the wonders that were beginning to unfold before our eyes? What more natural than that she should side with Cronk in his ever anxious pursuit after more proof of this engrossing subject?

Cronk left, promising to be back before sunset.

Meanwhile the doctor and I pursued our investigation of the more tangible points of the case.

"Have you any belief in this theory of the judge's ghost, doctor?" I asked.

"Have you?"

"I saw him in the hotel lobby. I can't very well forget that."

"No, nor I, either, although I have it only from your testimony, and the mouth of that fool Cronk. If I could forget that I would be inclined to suspect any one of three other possibilities."

This surprised me. There was only one other possibility, and so obvious a one that I could not entertain the idea of accusing anyone else.

"Do you mean you can suspect any one but the old Negro fakir?" I asked.

"Ah, there you have it. He is one of them. At the present moment he is the most suspicious. But there are two others."

I waited.

"Miss Shirley has told me something about her father's will. It was an ordinary will, but in one respect rather peculiar. He left a certain portion, amounting to quite a lot of money, to this octoroon woman, Maizie."

"What of it?"

"Nothing at all. Except that she is a rather unscrupulous looking woman. I believe she took some sort of advantage of the judge."

"You don't mean that you think there was anything between the old judge and this woman?"

"I do not," the doctor said irascibly. "And if I did, I would not presume to suggest it; I was the judge's friend. But I was never a friend of this parasite. You may have noticed how Miss Shirley and she hate each other."

"I have noticed it. And it leads me to

draw conclusions that I wouldn't want to put in words."

The doctor changed the subject. "Another beneficiary is the mozo, Pasqual. I wouldn't put anything beyond him."

I said that I wouldn't, either. But the mere fact that these domestics were beneficiaries of a will did not in my mind make a very strong case against them.

"How about this Negro, Pythagoras Awls?" I returned again to my main suspect.

"You may well ask that," the old doctor replied, nodding his head. "Miss Shirley told me something about him which puts him very much in the limelight of our suspicions: She said he came to see the judge several times before the latter's death."

"They had long talks. The judge, it seems, was interested in atavism, and the study of primitive savages."

"This fellow Awls, quack though he is, seems to be possessed of some pretty interesting folklore from the Congo, handed down to him from his grandfather, and more remote ancestors. They talked at great length on life after death, and such subjects."

I could not see any very tangible proof that Pythagoras Awls was guilty of murder merely because he talked about life and death with Judge Scudder. What I wanted was to bridge the more immediate gap between the old fakir and our present problems.

"I suspect him," I said. "But I don't have to go back to any conversations he had with the judge a month ago. Last night is sufficient."

"Why, just look here: Awls could have murdered that deputy. He could have thrown him over the banister up there, and then made his escape."

"I thought of that," the doctor said. "But then, I also thought of the fact that he was manacled and locked in his room."

"Manacled, yes. But as far as the locks are concerned, there isn't a lock in the whole house that couldn't be opened by an ordinary pass-key. On the other hand, the deputy himself might have unlocked the room, and at the same moment the Negro could have pounced on him."

"It was probably pitch dark. The deputy, you remember, had announced his intention of giving Awls the third degree some time during the night."

"Quite plausible. But who made away with the deputy's body?"

"The old faker himself?"

"Rather a stretch of the imagination. He's a pretty small man, and an old one. I can't exactly imagine him hurling the big deputy over the stairs."

"The trick of tripping up a man and tipping him over a balustrade would take more agility than strength. A strong man might have tussled. We would have heard it. The deputy probably just went over the banister, caught unawares, tackled by his legs, in the pitch dark. A slight man could have done the trick as well as a big man. At any rate, he could have done it just as expeditiously as the little mozo or the octoroon woman."

"There's the point about making away with the body. Who do you think did that?"

"The old Negro, of course," I said readily.

"Was there time enough before the first light went on?"

I reflected carefully. I remembered that when we who were on the top story came out with our lamps, we could not see just what was going on downstairs. The Negro—if he had planned it all very carefully—might have run down the flight of back stairs that lead to the kitchen, and then sneaked out in the moment of darkness that still remained, and have dragged the body away from the foot of the stairwell.

"But look here," the doctor said, "wasn't Cronk in the kitchen at that time making coffee? And didn't he have a light? The back stairs go directly into that kitchen, and he would have seen the Negro running down. You remember Cronk did not come out until after the fall of the body to the floor."

This completely upset my whole theory.

A body had been thrown, probably from the top gallery to the floor below, and it had been taken away. And whoever it was that had hurled that body from the

top story had not had time enough to run down the main staircase to the floor below before our lights, and the light from the doctor's room on the second story, would have betrayed him.

There was the one chance that he might have run down the back stairs through the kitchen, and then to the hallway, and dragged the body away before Miss Shirley appeared with her light.

But this, as the doctor pointed out, was impossible because of Cronk.

"In plain terms, we have to believe in the impossible," he concluded.

This brought us back to the preposterous and barbaric notion of the Mexican breed Pasqual, who affirmed that the judge walked from his grave each night to commit some new murder.

"A ghost," Dr. Zobel admitted, "might have been able to hide that body—but no human being could."

Before the day was over my theory that Pythagoras Awls was the guilty man, and was using his conjuror's tricks to befuddle us all, had a very serious blow. In fact, it was practically wiped out as false.

Pythagoras came back!

Now, just what this could mean neither Dr. Zobel nor I could determine.

The old Negro had cast suspicion upon himself by leaving, although in the last analysis it was not a very serious suspicion. He had cause enough to be afraid of the deputy sheriff, and of the house, and of us all. Negroes had been lynched in Texas, and when any one of their race got into trouble he had to watch out. It was best to stay away from trouble altogether, even if it involved bringing suspicion upon one's head.

Here was this old duffer manacled and imprisoned in a house where there were all sorts of mysterious proceedings afoot. What would you have done if you were in his place? You would get out as quick as you could.

Well, here he was back again. And his return, I must say, was harder to explain than his escape. Why should he come back into this mess, where he knew he could hope for only the scantest sort of justice?

I thought perhaps he had considered the folly of trying to run away. He was a wise enough old dog to know that he would have trouble getting very far. If he went to Louisiana he would not be received in the Marsh Country beyond the Sabine River, because there were none of his own people down that way.

Farther north there was the law and order of the whites. His other alternative was to go west toward the Mexican border, but then he would be escaping into the heart of Texas, and each mile he would be received with still more suspicion. Perhaps he was wise enough to come back and bluff it all out.

And then there was another motive which occurred to me later, and which I had good reason to believe was the actual motive that prompted him to return to play his part in the drama: he wanted money. He knew Miss Shirley had all that any human being would want, and more. These old tricksters have a fine nose for money.

He explained his disappearance of the night before very easily.

Entering the hallway where Miss Shirley, the doctor, and I were seated, he doffed his old silk top hat and held it aloft:

"Greetin's to you, Miss Scudder, and greetin's to you, gen'l'men."

"How in the name of Heaven did you get away?" the doctor exclaimed.

"I had a pass-key, doctor-boss. But I waited till the propitious time for to use same. And when I got home I filed off them handcuffs."

"And what did you come back for?"

"I changed my mind, doctor-boss. That that's the long and the short of it. I fled from the deputy sheriff, and then I arose and said to myself: Don' run away, Dr. Awls, don' run away. Nebber yet have you had occasion for to run away from mankind. Go back and do your duty."

"Your duty? What the devil's your duty?"

"To help those who are in distress."

"How do you think you can help us?"

"Spiritu'lly, doctor-boss, spiritu'lly."

"We've had enough of spirits in this confounded house!" the doctor exclaimed.

"They'll be plenty more, rovin' hereabouts, suh," Pythagoras Awls said, looking at us over the rims of his spectacles.

"Oh, you know that, do you? You know something about that?"

"It's mah specialty, suh," Pythagoras said. "And I've been given the power, handed down through seben generations, to do a little prognosticatin'."

"What do you prognosticate?" the doctor asked, trying to cover the note of scorn in his voice.

"The dead shall arise."

We both looked at the old darky and scrutinized him carefully. I had the impression, which struck me whenever we interviewed this grotesque character, that he would capitalize the whole mystery for his own gain. He was first and foremost a trickster.

"You said you believe the dead can rise," the doctor repeated. "Do you think you yourself have the power to raise them?"

We both believed he would say yes.

But he was hesitant. "There are charms, gen'l'men, and there are medicaments, and drugs known to African witch doctors. My great-grandmother come over f'um Africa, gen'l'men, f'um the Congo. She wasn't 'zactly what you-all would call a slouch in these heah miracles."

"She taught you something about raising the dead?" I asked.

He was again hesitant, but he must have reflected that it was more advantageous to his name and fame to answer in the affirmative, even though it might in some way incriminate him.

Now that the deputy sheriff was not on the scene, he seemed to be more concerned with boosting his stock as a snake doctor, and less concerned with getting into trouble.

"Do you think you could raise the dead—now?" I asked.

"It depends, Mr. Boss," he said, taking out a plug of tobacco and gnawing off a big hunk. "It depends. I should say, suh, it all depends upon what fo'm the death gets a-goin' in."

I could not understand the old Negro's chatter, but when I looked up to Dr. Zobel

I saw that a peculiar light had come over the long jaundiced face.

The doctor understood Negroes better than I. I took the attitude of washing my hands of this old fakir Pythagoras Awls. He was a quack doctor, and therefore he was Dr. Zobel's particular charge. I left the matter to him.

And apparently Dr. Zobel had made some sort of discovery. He nodded as our eyes met, and then abruptly dismissed the old man.

"Stay around here if you wish," he said. "I would like to have you within calling distance, as I believe your ideas on these matters are valuable." That was the old gentleman's way of dealing with the Negro, making him pleased with himself, but always keeping him in his place.

Pythagoras Awls seemed pleased and tremendously self-important. He raised his silk hat.

"Very well, gen'l'men. I'll walk to and fro in the patio, and contemplate over these here now spirit matters. For it's mah prognostication that the spirits will be hoverin' about this house like hoss flies around the boilin' sugar cane! Good mawnin' to you, Miss Scudder, ma'am. Good mawnin'!"

And he bowed himself out, put on the silk top hat at something of an angle, and strutted off to the pomegranates and crape myrtles and banana trees of the patio.

"Go back to Zopot's Bayou," the doctor said to me hurriedly. "Go straight to this fakir's cabin and search it through and through. What I'm looking for particularly is a hypodermic needle."

I stared. "You mean you incline to the theory that those black dots are not caused by a cottonmouth?"

"Exactly. They are needle marks, and that quack knows something about them. Examine his effects thoroughly. I'll write a note for you which, coming from me as coroner, will serve you in lieu of a search warrant." He turned to Miss Shirley. "I think, my child, we'll have this whole mystery cleared up by to-night."

Perhaps when night came the doctor had cleared up a few points of the mystery in

his own mind; but I was more baffled than ever.

I visited the cabin of Pythagoras Awls on Zopot's Bayou, a wretched hovel on stilts on the edge of a swamp. I reached it by a rickety board walk, something like a pier, leading across a great expanse of swamp grass and evil-smelling mud.

In the cabin I found a chest full of Negro charms, bear claws, bones, marked cards, and a secret book in a ridiculously cumbersome code with drawings of the zodiac, devils, and skeletons.

I found nothing in the way of a hypodermic needle. But there was one discovery I made which I knew would interest Dr. Zobel. It was a box. In it there were two sluggish cottonmouths.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GASP IN THE NIGHT.

I WILL now describe what happened to us that night.

I returned from Zopot's Bayou, arriving at the manse at about sunset. Cronk had already returned, bringing with him his camera. He was fired with enthusiasm over the task he had set for himself for that night. I reported to him and to Dr. Zobel concerning my discovery of the moccasins in Pythagoras Awls's most wretched dwelling place.

The announcement baffled the doctor, because it had the tendency to cast a certain doubt on his theory of a hypodermic needle causing the black dots on the two victims, the judge and Deputy Marteau.

Cronk, on the other hand, was not at all baffled. He concurred in the superstition that the devil had taken the form of a serpent to cause these deaths. And the fact that Pythagoras Awls, the devil's disciple, had two of these snakes in his possession only served to bolster up Cronk's implicit faith in the existence of the supernatural forces that were beleaguering us.

I must state hurriedly just what was going on in the house at the time Cronk and I and Dr. Zobel set up the camera for the purpose of those fool spirit photographs. Pythagoras Awls had been given

a room in the adobe house across the patio, where in old times the racing horses were kept.

The mozo, now allowed all the freedom he wanted, had retired to his room at the top of the house. The octoroon woman had likewise retired, an hour or so after dinner.

Miss Shirley was in her room, after spending a long time in earnest discussion with the doctor. He told us that she was getting more and more apprehensive. The death of Deputy Marteau, instead of allaying her feelings, as it most surely did at first, was now assuming a more sinister import.

It is scarcely necessary for me to say that the doctor and Cronk and I myself were very much of Shirley's way of thinking. And all three of us resolved to redouble our efforts to untangle the mystery for her sake.

The matter of fixing the camera for the spirit photographs was simple enough. Cronk assured us that this stuff spiritualists call "ectoplasm" is luminous enough to affect a photographic film. All that we needed to do, he said, was to leave the lens open and facing a point where we might expect the materialization of the spirit to appear.

We chose the judge's bedchamber on the second story as the probable scene in which he would stage his entrance; for it was there that on the night before we had heard the rapings.

The door to the judge's room was locked, and, respecting Shirley's wishes, we left it so. It had been locked, she said, since the day of his death, and nothing had been molested in the room. There was another door in the back, opening to the back hallway and staircase; but this had been kept locked also.

We could see no particular necessity of entering the room, for there was a transom above the door which would serve our purpose. In fact, Cronk pointed out that the farther away we set the camera from the room, the more chance there was of our success, for the lens, needless to say, would take in that much more scope.

We therefore opened the transom—which

was of stained glass—and set the camera on its sill. Cronk adjusted the range, opened the lens, and then descended the stepladder by which he had mounted to it. He then suggested that we remove the stepladder and leave everything as it had been before we set this "trap" for the ghost.

The suggestion struck me as rather childish, but very much in keeping with Cronk's gullible, ingenuous nature. He said that the spirits resent being tricked. The whole process reminded me of setting a trap for some wild animal in the jungle. But it is surprising, as I look back on it now, how the doctor and I joined in heartily with all the arrangements.

To tell the truth, I had a sort of underhanded reason in lending my moral support to this nonsense. It had occurred to me that those rappings might have been caused by some one whose intent was to trick us all into believing the ghost theory. In that case it would be very convenient to have a photograph of just who it was. My ignorance of photography, you may observe, was boundless. A human being moving around in that room during the night would not be photographed upon the film without a very strong light.

The doctor expected results, despite the fact that he had a scientifically trained mind. Miss Shirley had expressed great interest in the experiment. I myself expected that something might happen, even if the camera failed to record it.

We all believed that the judge would come to the old manse again that night. And we were more or less reasonable in our guess that he would revisit his own room, where he had died.

For my part, I might add, I had a grave misgiving concerning the safety of those of us who were to spend the night in the house. The judge—or whatever agent of the devil had taken Deputy Marteau's life—was going to claim another victim. And every one in the house, from Miss Shirley down to the frightened, whimpering Mexican hostler, entertained the same fear. Cronk was especially apprehensive. When he came down that stepladder I noticed his face was white. I asked what had hap-

pened. Had he seen anything beyond the sill of that skylight?

No; it was pitch dark. He could not have seen anything, and he confessed he did not dare to look. But he felt a peculiar breath coming from the room. Purely imagination, the doctor said—and I was of that opinion.

Cronk was terribly unnerved. His pathological imagination made him particularly susceptible. He would feel breaths, and see shadows, and hear sounds that no healthy man would have experienced.

He explained his ashen face. "I've been having a peculiar sort of headache. It is here—" He pointed to back of his cranium. "An ache as if my skull were cracked."

The doctor suggested taking a powder, but Cronk refused. Above all else he wanted to remain in the right mood; drugs were inimical to the functioning of mediumistic powers.

"I am going to sit here in a chair, near this door," he said, "and wait."

The doctor advised strongly against this. "In your condition, my young man, you need sleep," he said. He then suggested that we three take turns sitting there and keeping watch all night.

Cronk agreed to this.

It was during my watch—one o'clock, I think it was—that the thing happened.

My first sense impression was one of sound. I thought I heard whisperings. They were like echoes of some one at a great distance speaking softly, but with a voice that was carried along on a steady wind and augmented by vast, smooth, cavernous walls.

Of course, my imagination was in such a fever that I swore by all the gods that that whispering came from above the transom of the judge's door.

I looked up to the transom, and the hair of my head prickled. I thought I saw a faint wavering light in there.

For a long time I sat gazing upward, my heart thumping, my hair prickling, and my forehead turning cold.

Then something else happened. I heard the clink of silver, very soft, as though some one were taking out handfuls of coins

from a bag. Perhaps he was stacking them, counting them. But, if so, he was doing it very cautiously, as if intensely fearful that he would be heard.

This kept up I cannot say how long. I only know that for several moments I was too firmly gripped by a galvanic current of fear to move or cry out. Then I began to get some sort of control of myself.

I wanted to climb up there and look through the transom. But I reflected that to get the ladder and climb up would be a cumbersome and noisy procedure. And I didn't want to be heard—not by any manner of means.

I had the one thought uppermost in my mind that if whoever was in there knew I was spying, sitting outside his door, I would not last very long on this earth.

I was able finally to struggle to my feet. My feet seemed fairly paralyzed, so heavy they were, but I dragged them slowly, almost inch by inch, you might say, to the banister, and then I did a thing which I cannot explain. I tried to cry out!

Now, what was the sense of that? Was I having a nightmare, in which state every man seems to have the one impulse to howl? Perhaps I wanted to call the old doctor, who occupied a room on the opposite side of the gallery.

I imagine I made some sort of gasp which, with all my breath, elicited a sound as of a man awakening from a terrible dream.

It was not loud enough, however, for the doctor to hear. Cronk, who was upstairs in his room, on the same floor with the mozo and the octo-roon housekeeper, was of course unable to hear me.

But I believe that Presence in the judge's room heard me, for I remember having the impression that the dim parallelogram of light up there in the transom was blotted out.

I was left in pitch darkness, groping, lost, swaying in an immensity of black, dank atmosphere.

Then I heard some one call out:

"Lord have mercy! What you doin'?"

The voice was muffled, reminding me very much of the cry that I myself had attempted to make.

The next words grew more and more indistinct:

"I don't want your money. Keep it all. I won't tell nothin'. Only spare me—spare my miserable ole life for Heaven's sake! No—no—"

Then there seemed to be a final summoning of strength, and the remaining breath of life in an agonized scream.

I caught the words: "It's you—you fiend!"

Now, it is strange that I did not immediately recognize that voice; then again, it is not so strange, after all. It was not so much the voice of a man, as of a desperate, terrified animal. It was high-pitched; and that one cry seemed to tear the very lungs and throat of the poor wretch.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SINGLE CLEW.

THE whole household, I need hardly say, heard that desperate cry. I remember indistinctly that there was a turmoil, a scrambling of each one out of his bed, the lighting of lamps, the opening of doors. I myself was so dumfounded that I am unable to give any coherent record of what happened.

I know that I found myself presently with Dr. Zobel, carrying the stepladder to the door of the judge's room. There was plenty of light now. Maizie had come to the balustrade of the upper story, and was standing there with a lamp sending tumultuous rays of light, and wagging shadows down the stair-well.

There was no doubt about her hands trembling. If I had not been preoccupied with more engrossing fears, I would have called up to her to take care not to drop that lamp down to the floor of the hallway below.

The doctor's door, on the same floor on which we were, was now open giving us plenty of light. And Miss Shirley, in her silken wrapper stood below, looking up at us, her oval face a high spot of light. She was like Lady MacBeth.

As the tumult of events comes back to

me, I believe Cronk was the first on the scene; for I remember he was running down the stairs even before the doctor opened his door. Cronk—as he told me afterward, had heard the cry, and knowing that I was down there sitting outside the judge's door alone, he had feared for my safety.

Accordingly he had leaped from his bed, and out to the gallery without pausing to fumble for matches and a lamp.

We adjusted the ladder, and the doctor scrambled up. He said it was pitch dark in the judge's room. Indeed I saw no more evidence of that strange light.

"That yell was like a death cry," Cronk said. "The judge has another victim."

They all turned to me with a volley of questions. I recounted my experiences as best I could. But I imagine I must have been very inchoate. "There was a light," I said.

"A materialization," said Cronk. "The photograph will show us something when it's developed."

"And I heard the clinking of coins—as though some one were counting."

Miss Shirley had come up to join us. The announcement that I had heard counting had a very decided effect on her. She asked me several times to repeat my description of the sound. Maizie still remained on the gallery above, not daring to come any closer to the scene, but she heard everything I said.

"The judge was in the habit of counting over his money in there," she called down in a high-pitched, nervous voice. "Every night he did it—till we were all crazy with the sound of it."

Cronk seemed to become more enthused than frightened over these strange details. They were perfect manifestations of a spirit, he said.

"Who was it that the judge picked out this time?" he asked.

"The best way to find out is to go into that room," Miss Shirley said calmly. We were all surprised at her for this very natural statement. The fact is, none of us, the doctor, or Cronk, or myself, had entertained the slightest idea of going into the fateful bedchamber.

Cronk, in lieu of offering to go in, bussed

himself with another errand. He climbed up to the transom, and took down his camera. The doctor was wiping his forehead. "We must all have a drink first," he said.

Miss Shirley seemed to smile at our hesitancy—if you could call her expression a smile. It prodded me into saying:

"I'll go in."

"Then I'll get the key to the room," she said. "And I'll bring the doctor a glass of sherry."

When she returned with the key, a rather peculiar incident occurred. She held it out to me, but at the same moment, she caught sight of Maizie's face, a terrific mask, vivid and reddened by the beams of the lamp she was holding staring down at us.

Miss Shirley held the key in her hand tightly just as I reached for it. Then she said quietly, still looking up to the top story where Maizie was:

"Where is Pasqual?"

That question, given out in such a calm, quiet tone, had in it the power and the devastation of a thunderbolt.

We all looked at each other, bewildered, chagrined. Why hadn't we noticed that point before?

Pasqual had not appeared.

He was the one member of the household who had not come into the hall in response to that cry from the judge's bedchamber.

Maizie went back immediately to the mozo's room, and returned.

"He's not in his room."

"Maybe it is Pasqual who was in there," the doctor said.

I objected: "It was not the Mexican's voice. I can tell his accent. It was a Negro. I believe it was the old fakir—but his voice was muffled. There is a strong probability that he was being gagged while he was yelling."

"We'll soon find out," Shirley said. "Here's the key."

I took it. The doctor, after tossing off his glass of sherry, followed me. Cronk stayed out, feverishly rolling and extracting the film from his camera.

Miss Shirley—contrary to the doctor's admonitions—came into the room with us, bearing one of the lamps.

I fancy we stayed in there as short a

time as possible. I know I was gripped with a certain abhorrence for the musty smell of the place. It had been kept closed—windows and doors—since the judge's death.

The room was empty.

But there were traces of some one having been there; at just what time, there was no possibility of telling. The most important point was that the back door of the room, leading to a hall and the back staircase, was unlocked.

On the floor of the room we found two coins, silver dollars. Although my sense of hearing in regard to the clinking of coins is not by any means acute, I could be fairly certain that the money I had heard being stacked and counted was money of that denomination, silver dollars.

This led us to examine the room more carefully for any possible evidence of the mozo or Pythagoras Awls having been there. We found nothing; that is to say, nothing that belonged to either of those curious old men. I did happen to pick up a cuff-link, gold with a setting of topaz.

Upon showing it to Miss Shirley, I noticed she paled, and then explained that it was one of a pair which the judge had worn. He had, she said, been buried with them.

My search of the floor—a second careful scrutiny—brought out another discovery. The room had not been swept for three weeks, and there was a coating of dust on the mats and the hardwood floor. Near the bed I noticed tracks, little semi-circular rifts in the dust.

I called the attention of Dr. Zobel to these, and he held the lamp above them for a long time, scrutinizing them carefully.

"They're tracks of a snake," he said. "I believe that it may be a moccasin."

Before I stop writing for this night, I wish to put in one more note. This morning I again visited Judge Scudder's tomb. I found that he was not lying in the same position in which I found the body at the last visit. I remembered the position very well. Every detail was engraved indelibly upon my memory.

I noticed also this morning that he wore a gold cuff-link set with topaz. It was a mate to the one we found in the big bed-chamber of the manse.

CHAPTER XV.

FOUR OUT OF NINE.

I TAKE up my pen again to-night.

Counting Judge Scudder, there are nine people who have been intimately connected with this case. I include Cronk and myself, although we were unimportant actors drawn in to play our humble parts, which bit by bit have grown more important.

Let me enumerate the nine: The judge, his step-daughter, Dr. Zobel, the octoroon woman, the Mexican Pasqual, the "snake doctor," Pythagoras Awls, Deputy Marteau, and lastly Cronk, and myself.

Of these nine, four have died with that curse marked upon them—the black points.

I am of the opinion that those black points were caused by the teeth of a moccasin. Cronk believes it, too; only his belief steps beyond into an unshakable faith in the supernatural. Together with the mozo, he holds steadfastly to the bizarre notion that the devil comes among us in the form of a serpent.

I also believe that the judge was in that bedchamber last night. In what form, it is not for my materialistic mind to guess.

The doctor has taken a step somewhat in the direction of skepticism. He has learned something, I believe, from Shirley, or else from the autopsy which he had performed upon the body of Deputy Marteau.

As a result, he said he had made an important discovery. It was so important that he had very definite hopes of telling Miss Shirley, and me, and Cronk just what the key to this whole mystery was. Meanwhile he begged us not to press him for any information until he had taken one more step.

"I may—with my present knowledge—accuse the wrong person," he said. "The one whom I suspect at present would surprise you. In fact, it surprises me. I cannot believe it. At any rate, you gentlemen

—and you, Miss Shirley—can not help me in any way until I have taken one more step."

Just what all this was about, neither Cronk nor I could guess. Cronk hazarded the absurd opinion that the doctor might have entertained some sort of suspicion against Miss Shirley. If so, he would naturally refrain from airing any such opinion before Cronk and me.

Whatever his reasons, I decided to grant the doctor's request in good faith, and press him no further.

The fact is, I did not consider it necessary to depend on the doctor's opinion. I felt that I was very near to solving the mystery myself.

The murders had been committed by one man, and I had narrowed the possibilities down to three: It was either the mozo Pasqual, or Pythagoras Awls, or—don't think I'm mad—the judge himself.

Pythagoras has again disappeared. But the mozo—and this was certainly baffling—was in his bed peacefully asleep when we visited his room in the morning!

I waited yesterday morning for Cronk to come back from town. He had taken his film to be developed, and promised to return as soon as he had accomplished this one errand.

The doctor had gone to his home to carry on the investigation in his own house. I could not for the life of me guess what he meant by this. He said he wanted to put in an hour or two of research work in his library.

Cronk returned before noon. He said that he had failed utterly in his experiment in spirit photography. The film showed nothing.

He let me examine it. There was as he said, nothing in the way of a materialized spirit on the negative. There was a small blotch in the shape of a candle flame. But that was all.

A candle flame burning for a few moments would have left that impression, he said.

I recalled the light which I had seen beyond the transom. In the more rational moments of daytime I was able to persuade myself that that light might have

been a candle, and that my own imagination lent the eerie quality which I had been impressed with the night before.

"Some one was burning a candle in there," Cronk said. "As for ectoplasm, it always takes a more significant form, a hand or a head or a body. This is a failure."

We consulted with Miss Shirley.

She listened to the opinion that Cronk and I set forth, that the agent of all this mystery was either Pythagoras Awls, or the mozo, or the judge himself.

I do not believe she was greatly impressed.

She listened to the case which I presented against Awls and the old Mexican, and she listened to Cronk's more incoherent but fervently spoken words accusing the spirit of Judge Scudder.

I saw that same expression of canny understanding, almost pity, that so resembled a smile. What she was going to tell us then, I don't know; for we were interrupted:

Maizie, who was listening outside the door of the drawing room where we were seated, entered.

It was a habit of hers. She never seemed satisfied to let us stay very long in Miss Shirley's company; a violent suspicion seemed to ravage her.

"What do you want?" Miss Shirley asked.

"What do I want? You know what I want, mam'zelle. I want to protect myself. That's what. I want to have my say."

"Go on," I said. "We're listening. What have you to say?"

"I'm not going to wait out there while you three discuss us, and rip us up and down. No, par foi, I know what's going on! You're all wild to pin this on some one—and how do I know that you won't pin it on some one you wish was guilty?"

This was a very bland reference to Miss Shirley's attitude toward her housekeeper. It flashed through my mind then that Miss Shirley suspected the woman, and that she and the doctor were building up a case against her.

For my part, I have not yet had the

slightest suspicion of the octoroon. She is a savage sort of thing, but like anything savage she is childlike. I don't believe she is treacherous.

When she speaks she tears herself into tatters over any trivial problem that annoys her. If she were treacherous she would be calmer.

"I don't know what's happened to the judge. But you think I know. You get behind closed doors and discuss me, and point out everything I do as if I was crazy. Well, maybe I am. Mon Dieu, who wouldn't be in this house? But I don't know anything, I tell you. I'm innocent. Before the saints, before the Mother of God!"

I suggested that we had not yet said anything to her that could be taken in the light of an accusation.

"Oh, you haven't?" she retorted. "Maybe not you, m'sieu'. You're quality. I'm not talking about you."

It was quite evident whom she was talking about. "Last night, as soon as *you* saw me," she said, turning upon Miss Shirley as if to rend her to pieces, "you gave me a look I'll never forget. And you told me to call the mozo.

"The mozo, eh? What about him? What should I know about him? Think I've any dealings with that little Mex breed. Par foi! A likely idea! He's too queer in the way he acts for me to go within ten feet of him—"

"How do you mean queer?" I asked.

"Listen to this," she snapped. "Didn't the mozo cook the judge's food?"

We did not deny it. Miss Shirley should have known that.

"Didn't he make the judge his coffee every few hours when the judge was ailing, and had that headache in the back of his skull which he was complaining of so much?"

I looked to Shirley. She nodded. Cronk was preoccupied with a problem of his own. I saw his hand go to the back of his head. He had that morning complained that his headache would not leave him.

"Didn't the judge complain about that coffee—you remember, mam'zelle? Well, maybe that's something to think about.

The judge said there was too much chicory. You remember that, perhaps? Or maybe you don't want to remember."

Miss Shirley seemed to overlook the continual suggestion of aspersion in her housekeeper's words. She was beginning to be interested in just what Maizie was saying.

"I remember Maizie," she said quietly. "But it is not enough to make an accusation of murder. You must have reasons."

"Oh, you'll ask me for more reasons, will you? For the first time you ask me for reasons, instead of talking about me. Bien! I'll meet you halfway. I'll unravel this mystery that's been making you all crazy. Maybe you'd like to know why it was that the judge came back and counted his money —like he always did before going to bed? Well, I'll tell you."

She addressed herself now to me.

"*It wasn't the judge.*"

Cronk grunted. The mere supposition that it wasn't the judge, after all the proof we had had, seemed to amuse him. What fools we must have been in his sight!

"It was the mozo," the octoroon woman said assuredly. "I've spied on him before. He got his money from the bank, the money the judge left him; *you* know that."

Shirley admitted it. Pasqual had taken his check to the bank immediately, and had it changed into silver. The amount made a very good hoard that must have been dear to his bleary old eye.

"I've watched him," Maizie went on excitedly. "He hid it. Then I found where he went at night to get it out. It was in a hole underneath the feed rack in the barn.

"I joked with him about it; so he hid it again; and this time he hid it where he knew I wouldn't go to find it: in there in the judge's room, which was locked up.

"No one dared go in that room—he thought. And I reckon he was right. No one went there. But I saw him go in by a back door which he had a key to. And he went often—after midnight."

"How is it no one ever heard him count the money?" I asked skeptically.

"Perhaps he never counted it till last night," Maizie said. "And perhaps if he did count it, he knew no one could hear."

"I heard last night," I objected.

"That's because of the transom," the woman said. "You opened it for that camera. But Pasqual didn't know you'd opened it. I told him about the camera this morning, and about that opened transom, and—nom de Dieu—you should have seen him turn color. He thought you'd taken his picture!"

These revelations were of such a serious nature that Cronk and I determined to investigate them further. It was a simple matter to order that Mexican down to the hall and question him.

He was obviously afraid of Cronk and me, and we had good reason to believe that a little pressure would make him say something to incriminate himself.

Miss Shirley followed us out into the hall. She wanted to be present, she said. I was somewhat averse to this, as I knew that with her moral protection the mozo might not be sufficiently intimidated.

But the girl insisted, and her old Mexican mozo, when he came downstairs, looked up to her whimpering and begging her not to leave him alone with us.

She had no intention of leaving him alone, I could see that. She stayed in the hall with us, guarding him like a mother protecting a recalcitrant boy who is being catechized by the police.

I did my best, however, to get the upper hand of the sniveling little wretch.

"We have a photograph that was taken of you last night," I said.

Miss Shirley looked up at me in surprise. "Is that true?" she asked.

I disregarded her question. "You were in the judge's room, counting money. Pythagoras Awls was in there, too."

That last statement, although I did not know it when I said it, was the one thing that broke the old mozo. The fact is everything I had said was the plain truth, despite the fact that I was only guessing at it.

"If these things are not true, Pasqual," his mistress said gently, "you have the right to deny them. And I will give you a chance to prove they are wrong."

The mozo's lips quivered. His one good eye roved helplessly from his mistress to Cronk, to me, to the triumphant and bel-

igerent Maizie, and then back again to his mistress.

"What have you to say?" Cronk asked.

"If you have a photograph, señors—" he began.

"Our photograph makes a denial rather futile, doesn't it, now?" I said.

"Sí, señor."

"Very well, then. You make no denial."

"How can I mak the denial?" he whimpered.

"You can't. That's just it. Let's all agree that you were in there. Now, then, where's the old Negro, Awls?"

The little mozo burst out suddenly, taking on a sort of desperate vehemence as he realized he was caught: "How do I know, por Dios? The black—he is no frand of mine. Where he is, Heaven knows, not me, Pasqual! In the Fires, perhaps."

"Who sent him to the Fires?"

"The Diablo incarnate!" Pasqual cried as if from the depths of his heart.

"If Awls is found dead—in the bayou—or somewhere about this house, do you realize who will be blamed?"

He looked up, bewildered, and after racking his poor, bewildered old brains over my statement, he cried out:

"You mean me—Pasqual—you mean I kill thees black man to death? Ees a lie, por Dios. I swear by the angels abov'—what do I know of thees black man? Some one leap upon him—sí—I hear that wis my ears. The light she is blow' out; the Negro he is cry lak the death cry."

"And who do you think it was that leaped upon him?" I asked.

He took courage at this. It was the first indication I had given of not bullying him into confessing the murder himself.

He looked up at his mistress, and his trembling lips stiffened slightly as his courage came back. Then he said:

"The Maestro—he is come back from the Fires to kill us all! He is come back last night to kill thees black hombre!"

We did not answer for a moment. The fact is Shirley and Cronk seemed to be only too ready to believe what the mozo had said. Maizie and I still went on the previous, very well-founded supposition that

the mozo was responsible for the whole tragedy.

"Do you think for a moment that a jury would believe that?" I asked. "Here you were found in that bedchamber with Pythagoras Awls. Pythagoras Awls has disappeared, whisked away perhaps."

"Let us suppose that he is dead, that his body will be found, as we found the deputy's body. Well, then, will a jury think you are guilty, or will they suspect the judge, who has been dead three weeks?"

Pasqual looked at me dumbly. Evidently he was not capable of grasping the meaning of a speech of such length. It seemed very complicated, and also very threatening. His lips trembled again.

While he was in this mental torture, Cronk took advantage of the psychological moment, and asked:

"Just what were you doing in that room with Pythagoras Awls?"

The mozo looked up to his mistress as though to ask her if it was obligatory to answer this question. She encouraged him with a smile. "Go on, Pasqual. Don't be afraid. Tell all you know, and I'll help you."

Between Cronk and me and Miss Shirley, the mozo was at a terrific disadvantage. I believe he told more because his mistress was there than he would have told through fear of Cronk or me. As you may have heard, detectives have long since discovered that a brutal third degree is often not so productive as a more kindly and confidential attack.

"I will confess," he said, wringing his gnarled, dry hands until the knuckles cracked. "I hide my money in thees room because I know it will not be molest."

"We know that already," Maizie said with a grunt.

"I owe money to thees black hombre; I tell him I will get my money from where she is hid. He follow like coyote following sick steer. He come into the room."

"I tell him keep quiet for fear we awake se household. He mak threat. I give him very moch silver peso, dollars. He wants more. I count more, and beg him to go from the Maestro's room, because I want to hide my money once more."

"Then the candle she is snuff out—may-be by wind, maybe by Diablo himself. I hear the sound of two men tussle thees away, and that away. I hear the black hombre screech out for help."

"Then I know the Diablo he is come back. The Maestro is walk' on the earth again, for to kill some one to death. And I scoop up my money, and mak escape from the room. Ees all I know."

"Perhaps it's all you know about the Diablo," I said. "But you know something else, which I'd like to have you explain. Just what secret were you bribing Pythagoras to keep?"

"Secret, señor?" the man cried piteously.

"Pythagoras had a secret. He told us all, he had it—and that he would divulge it. He knew who murdered the judge."

"Por Dios," the man shrieked, "I did not murder the judge—my maestro! You lie. You all mak terrible lie against poor ole Pasqual! I am out of my wits. I am craze'. I am loco with fear of thees house. To-day I mak escape from here—if," he added, glancing up at Shirley, "the señora she mak escape, too."

This speech moved me somewhat with pity. I gave the old fellow a chance to compose himself, but then I pressed on:

"You haven't told us yet what you were bribing the Negro for."

"Bribe? Ees no bribe!"

"Then what was the payment for."

"Bueno. Ees payment." The mozo spoke as if happy to find the right word.

"What for?"

He writhed again, cracking his knuckles. His eye roved toward his mistress piteously, as if begging her to intercede again.

But this time she was obdurate. I believe she had implicit faith in the old duffer, and was for that reason trying to get him to tell everything he knew, if for no other reason than to free himself from unjust suspicion.

He thought a long time. I was confident he was groping for some plausible lie. When he did tell us what the payment was for I could see no reason in the world why he had been so secretive about it.

"I pay for a charm which the black hombre ees give me."

"What sort of charm?" I asked skeptically.

"A necklace which she are of elephant's hair and bones."

"Why did you want that?"

"For to keep away the Diablo which is haunt this hacienda."

Now in some ways that was a very plausible story; he was just the sort of man who would give half his fortune for some worthless trinket from the snake doctor. The events in the house, furthermore, would serve to make such an amulet of inestimable worth in the eyes of the superstitious old breed.

Miss Shirley believed the story; so did Cronk. But Maizie snorted at it. It was far more likely that the mozo had some secret, and was bribing Pythagoras to hold his tongue, she thought; then when Pythagoras followed him into the judge's room, what more natural than that Pasqual should turn upon the old Negro, and forever silence him?

I recalled the choking words of Pythagoras: "*I don't want your money. Keep it all. I won't tell nothin'!*"

Wasn't that proof enough?

I ordered the mozo locked up in his room on the third story. Cronk and I would stand guard in turn. Then when the doctor came he could relieve us.

Perhaps the doctor would come with the last link that we needed in our chain of evidence. Also there was Maizie, who could sit on watch in case both Cronk and I had reason to leave. In this particular duty I was convinced she could be trusted implicitly.

Before the doctor returned late in the evening, about sunset, I had a talk with Shirley. And it resulted in a very important revelation.

This was yesterday afternoon about five o'clock.

"You seem to be out of sympathy with our attitude toward that old Mexican," I said.

"I am. Because I know he is innocent of it all."

I was almost out of patience with the girl; I truly believe her affection for the old household servant completely blinded

her to what seemed a most obvious chain of incriminating circumstances.

"Do you suspect anybody?" I asked.

She looked up rather resentfully at me. "I don't know why I should tell you," she said.

"Pardon me then; I've been confoundedly intrusive all along."

"No. I thank you for that. You've tried to help me in my distress. I want you here. Then again, I wish you would go."

"I will—as soon as you say the word."

"I want you to go because I think you're in danger. I think we're all in danger."

It certainly looked as if her fears were well founded. "Then you realize," I said, "that there's something, or some person in this house that is menacing us. I'd like to stay here until we find out what it is."

"Even if you yourself—"

"Even if I'm the next one selected to die," I said, almost laughingly. Then I added: "What have I to fear? What enemy have I in this house?"

"No," she said reflectively. "He may not have been your enemy. I think perhaps—I hope, that you're immune."

"Just who do you mean by 'he'?" I asked.

"The man who murdered Deputy Marteau to save me from any further insults from him, the man who attacked old Pythagoras Awls last night."

"Your mozo could answer very well to both of those indictments," I said. "I believe he would murder any one who took the attitude toward you that Deputy Marteau did."

"It is not the mozo," she said again.

"Then who is it?"

"The judge."

I laughed. "We all believe that, we who want to believe in spirits."

"Not his spirit," she said.

I darted a quick glance at her. Her voice had surprised me. "Just what do you mean?"

"I mean it is the judge himself—who is alive."

"Good Heavens! How can you say that?" I cried. "Didn't your own doctor, in whom you put so much faith, pronounce him dead three weeks ago?"

She was silent a long time. Then quietly she made a very surprising admission. "I don't know how much faith I put in Dr. Zobel when he is sodden with our amazanilla sherry."

I gasped. I could scarcely believe my ears. The very idea of her losing faith in her one friend, the aristocratic old gentleman, Dr. Zobel, was abhorrent to me.

It was unpleasant because I could not help reflecting on what a terrible quandary the poor girl was in.

Here in the maelstrom of these nerve-racking events she had nothing to cling to except one straw, the hard-drinking old country doctor. And he was no longer a help, for her faith in him was gone.

"Just what happened that made you doubt him?" I asked.

"The fact that you and your friend, Cronk, saw the judge alive."

"That may have been an apparition," I said doubtfully.

"I don't think it was."

"You really think it was the judge himself—and not his spirit!"

"I do."

"But Dr. Zobel's verdict as coroner."

"That's just it. The doctor came that night after spending many hours on a maternity case. He had bolstered up his strength with prodigal drinks of whatever liquor he could get his hands on.

"He came here—I remember now—in a very maudlin state. I thought in my stupidity that he was weeping because of the death of his old friend, the judge. He was weeping because of his drunken condition.

"They say he made a mistake in delivering the child at that maternity case; it was all the midwife and others could do to save it. Then he came here—"

"And made another mistake, you mean!" I exclaimed.

She nodded.

A whole new vista of the case, terrifying in its revelations, opened up before me. I considered from every angle the remote but terrible possibility: what if a man were pronounced dead by some coroner who was not possessed of his normal accuracy and insight? What if that man came back among

the living, and wreaked vengeance on whomsoever he chose?

What if he had been able, let us say, by the use of some strange drug, to put himself into a cataleptic trance? That was not beyond credibility. Suppose he could repeat the process, putting himself in the trance whenever he so wished, and when awakening arise and wander about, killing with impunity, terrifying the poor mortals who had remained on this side of the threshold of death.

Perhaps he might kill just through some malignant desire inspired by the drug—without motive.

But still my mind refused to believe this hideous thing.

"How could he have got out of his coffin—how could he have unlocked his tomb?" I asked.

Shirley looked at me and saw the despair I was in as I tried desperately to believe this enormity.

Then she made one more revelation, which in some ways was the most important that had yet come from her lips.

"He was with that Negro Pythagoras Awls during long conversations on life and death," she said. "I believe the Negro snake doctor put some queer ideas in his head. A day or so before the judge died he told me he might not die, but that he might seem as dead."

"The old fakir had got him into this obsession. At any rate, he begged me as his one dying wish to see that in the event of his coming into a 'second life,' as the fakir termed it, he would have air."

After this conversation I felt that I would not have a very good night's sleep. Imagine trying to sleep when you're convinced that there is a man, crazed with some infernal sort of drug, wandering about ready to pounce on the first victim he could find and kill him!

I was right in my prophecy of a sleepless night. I did not sleep a wink. It was the most harrowing night that had ever happened to me, and I hope against hope that I will never spend another like it. But as things look now, we'll all have to go through just such another experience to-night. For the mystery is still unsolved.

As I said when I first started to write to-day, four have already been chosen and marked with that cursed mark, the black dots that resemble a moccasin bite. Five of us are left.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE THIRD STORY BALCONY.

WHEN the doctor came back late that evening he was still reticent about his theories. But his refusal to take the rest of us into his counsel no longer puzzled me.

I had a peculiar intuition that it had something to do with his own reputation. I believe he had come somewhere near to the truth, but the truth had cast an unfavorable light upon his own skill as a physician.

Whether I am right in that opinion events will show. At any rate, the doctor would divulge nothing of his day's work, except for the rather inconsequential announcement that he had visited Pythagoras Awls's cabin, and had brought back the huge tome of cipher manuscript which I had noticed on my examination of the place.

It appears that Shirley Scudder had a knack in deciphering codes—a little hobby of hers. She promised to look into the book. Once she worked out the code, she said, the translation of the whole manuscript would be simple enough.

"I doubt if it is of any importance," the doctor said. That is probably why he divulged this part of his day's investigation to Cronk and me. Anything of importance which he had discovered he kept to himself.

I took the opposite attitude toward him, telling him everything. I told him about the coffee which the mozo served every day to the judge, and how the judge had complained of the taste of too much chicory.

Most of these Louisianans put enough chicory into their coffee to make the drink untasty to any one not used to it. The incident, in fact, might have been without any significance at all. The judge—not being a Creole himself—was not particularly partial to Creole habits in cooking.

But the doctor thought the point over for a while, and then said:

"It is in line with what I have been investigating. I believed Judge Scudder was poisoned."

This was not particularly enlightening. "Do you accuse the mozo?" I asked.

"I'm not prepared yet to say who I accuse. But I believe the mozo knew something about that coffee." He added a little later: "And I believe Pythagoras Awls knows what the poison was."

"Do you accuse Awls?" Cronk asked.

"I say I'm not prepared to accuse anyone. I will say this, however, that if Pythagoras Awls is not guilty he is better than innocent."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, somewhat out of patience with such equivocating.

"I mean that he may have given the judge a drug—as an antidote."

The truth flashed through my mind instantly that Dr. Zobel had spent the day investigating poisons. He might have stumbled onto something baffling—something that only an old tramp of a Negro, who was possessed of tricks handed down from generations of voodoo ancestors, could explain.

I recalled the fact that the doctor had performed an autopsy on the body of Deputy Marteau.

"Do you believe the deputy was poisoned?" I asked.

"I do."

This surprised us. Cronk smiled. "Deputy Marteau was hurled from a bannister from a height of three stories," he said. "His neck was broken. You said that yourself."

"Nevertheless he was poisoned," Dr. Zobel said firmly.

"And you think that may have caused his death?"

"Possibly."

We both showed a marked disbelief in any such notion. "What in the world was he doing falling down a stairwell, then?" I asked.

The doctor's long yellow face lit up with a knowing, canny expression. "Have either of you gentlemen considered the possibility

that he may have thrown himself over that banister?"

No, we had not.

"Have you considered the possibility that, granted he was poisoned, the drug had some peculiar effect upon him, making him crazed?"

"I have not considered the possibility of Deputy Marteau being poisoned at all," I said.

"I remember he complained of a headache," Cronk put in. And he had good cause to remember it. Cronk said he had been tortured all day with the most violent localized pains.

"There you have it!" the doctor said triumphantly.

Yes, there we have it. But just what is it we have? Poison has been administered, let us say, to two different men—the judge and the deputy. But who did the poisoning? Weren't we back at the very beginning of the circle again?

"It's between Pythagoras Awls and Pasqual," I said.

Cronk shook his head. "It's not quite so simple as all that."

"Then what have you to offer?" Doctor Zobel asked.

"I am going to take some more photographs to-night."

"Stuff and nonsense!"

And in the same breath I voiced very much the same opinion. Yet I was not averse to Cronk's trying his game. "If you have more light—" I suggested.

"I shall open the lens to its widest," said Cronk. "If there is any manifestation I believe I may get some sort of an impression."

"How about lighting candles in the judge's room, and leaving the camera where we left it last night?" You see, I was in hopes that by some miraculous chance we might catch a picture of an intruder coming into that room. "If you attached a string to your camera so that the opening of a door—that back door of the room—"

"Stuff and nonsense!" the old doctor grumbled.

"I will do whatever you gentlemen wish," Cronk said. "I am averse to try-

ing to trick the spirits, but if you want to try this stunt of a string operating the lens you'll need stronger light than candle light to get results."

I realized this difficulty. If we wanted to catch a marauder by surprise we could not very well use brilliant lights. If we had electric lights there was, of course, the possibility of switching them on at the same time that the string operated the camera lens. But this complicated system of tricks did not appeal to either me or the doctor.

"Take your pictures your own way," I said to Cronk. "I've no doubt your ectoplasm, as you call it, will register without human assistance."

"It has been known to do so many a time, according to the Bulletin of the Society for Psychical Research," my credulous friend remarked.

Neither of us helped Cronk in his second experiment at spirit photography. The fact is, we considered that we had proceeded far enough in the case to discard all such nonsensical business.

It was now distinctly a question of who did the poisoning. The doctor and I, after a long conference, decided to put the mozo through another third degree. Or, rather, we decided that the doctor question him alone.

He went into the room on the third floor, and remained closeted for some time. When he came out I was surprised with the definiteness of his result:

"The mozo is guilty."

Dr. Zobel had not, so far as I know, learned anything that we others had not already learned. But the case seemed absolutely waterproof.

The ill-tasting coffee; the fact that the Mexican had been seen by the judge's grave several times during the past two or three weeks, purportedly planting grass and flowers there; the bribing of Awls to keep his tongue, and Awls's own words which I had heard, saying he "would tell nothing"; the fact that the mozo had found the deputy's body in the swamp so conveniently, when any one with the most superficial care might have successfully kept it hidden under the hyacinths; the fact that the mozo was upstairs on the

third story when the deputy was thrown over the banisters; the will of the late judge bequeathing a good sum of money to the mozo; all these facts put together made an irrefutable case.

"I advise calling the sheriff immediately," I said.

But the doctor demurred. "I have spoken to Miss Shirley, making that very suggestion; but she has begged me to wait one more night. I gave her my promise. We three can watch the mozo's room. There is no chance of his climbing out of his window. We can take turns. Then when morning comes I'll have another talk with Miss Shirley, and lay the whole case before her."

We were satisfied to do this. Cronk in particular wanted one more night to make his experiment in spirit photography. To call in the law might upset the equilibrium which had been so receptive to spiritualistic phenomena during the last three eventful nights.

Thus it was that we entered upon our fourth night.

It all happened very suddenly. I look back upon it as a cataclysm descending upon the house.

A few minutes before it happened the wind, which had been freshening all evening and all night up until midnight, redoubled in its force.

It was an atmospheric disturbance common to the marsh country after a big storm. It is called by the people in the Gulf States the "little brother" to the hurricane. Occasionally it comes a month after the main disturbance, sometimes within a few days.

This particular wind was of no other importance to our fate, except that it gave the air a peculiarly electric twitchy feeling, as Cronk says, "which was propitious for manifestations." From a more practical point of view, it was important in that it blew out the lamp which lit the hall where I was sitting. This lamp was on a table just outside the mozo's door, and I sat there writing.

I immediately fumbled for matches, but in the flurry of excitement that gripped me I knocked the box to the floor. For a

few moments I groped, and was aware of a doleful shrieking of the wind, which until now I had not noticed. A shutter was banging somewhere, and the rattan screen of a window inside of my room was flapping and whistling. I also heard some one running up the stairs.

Of course, in my disordered imagination I pictured the judge wandering in out of the tempest as he had done in the lobby when the hurricane was blowing.

But this step was not the uncertain, slow movement which had characterized the step we had heard mounting these same stairs a few nights before. It was running. I believe it was some one running on all fours. You have heard a boy run upstairs, using both hands and feet. That was what this sounded like.

My first impulse was to call for Cronk, who was down on the second floor at the time, waiting outside the door of the judge's room—which was now unlocked. He was waiting for the appearance of that light which I had seen through the open transom the night before.

He told me this morning that he had seen the light. He also told me that he heard the patterning of feet running up the stairs. He said he believed something opened the judge's door and came out, brushing past him. A fit of fear prevented him from either reaching out or crying to me.

The same sort of fit, I must confess, took hold of me. I do not know where the doctor was. He was perhaps lying down in his room. At any rate, what happened occurred with no one on that third-story gallery except myself—and this thing that came up the stairs on all fours.

Although my fear was enough to tighten my throat and numb me sufficiently to prevent me from yelling, it did not paralyze my limbs. I was thinking of Shirley. I was desperately anxious to get this whole terrible game over with.

I waited, my heart pounding like a bird's, as the patterning of feet stopped. It stopped on the landing not ten feet away from me. I had the impression then that the Thing was tiptoeing toward me. The whistling of the rattan screen and the wailing of the

wind masked whatever sound there was of footsteps on that gallery. But I was convinced beyond the shadow of any doubt that there were steps tapping toward me.

I was not going to wait there until I was pounced upon by this being. I was not going to wait immobile and defenseless to be brained and then perhaps hurled over those banisters.

As the steps came closer I had sufficient light from the clear sky to see a low-crouched form move across my doorway.

Was I the one elected to die that night? Or was that murderous thing tiptoeing past my door toward the door of the mozo's room—or toward Maizie's?

I did not wait to find out.

I leaped for the blot of pitch darkness into which he had just merged.

The thing eluded me. I grasped viciously at his clothes—only to clutch him somewhere near the lapel, which was jerked out of my fingers. In my hand I still retained a silk bandanna which had been in the coat pocket under the lapel.

A blow on the side of my face sent me hurtling to the floor, though I doubt if it was forceful enough to have knocked me out. I lay there, as I thought, with my senses completely awake; but, who knows? I might have lain there for several moments in a daze.

At any rate, I was in a sufficient daze from the blow to be oblivious of just when Maizie came out of her room. She had lit a lamp, evidently; for her door, being opened, admitted a flood of lamplight onto the gallery. Cronk had likewise run up the stairs, and was kneeling beside me, holding up my head.

When I was sufficiently recovered from the blow, I sat up.

In my hand I still clutched that bandanna.

Cronk was looking at it, his eyes bulging. And Maizie was looking at it, her splendid dark eyes showing the whites all around the pupils, her heavily jeweled hands to her breast.

I recognized the bandanna myself. It was one of those fancy handkerchiefs which men wear with the corners protruding from a breast pocket.

I recalled the fact that Judge Scudder had worn a handkerchief of this very pattern. It had been in his breast pocket, the purple embroidered corners protruding.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CAMERA'S REPORT.

THE two last victims to die with the moccasin marks are the only two against whom we have been able to build any case. They are Pythagoras Awls and the mozo Pasqual.

We found the mozo in his room a few moments after my experience on the third-story gallery. He had been felled with a single blow, which evidently had instantly finished him.

We found Pythagoras Awls much later. He had been tucked away in a closet of the judge's room—a closet that had been locked on the night that we made our hurried search. We had not looked in there—a very stupid oversight; but considering our horror of the room, it is not hard to understand why we made this unfortunate blunder.

Both Pythagoras Awls and the little Mexican died with that mark of the devil, or the serpent, or whatever it was, upon their necks at the base of the skull.

Had they died by some deadly and instantaneous poison injected into them by a hypodermic needle—as the doctor suspected? That was the question that came to my mind.

It could not have been a moccasin bite, for the simple reason that that reptile's poison does not work instantly. The mozo was dead when we entered the room, a few moments after my set-to with that Thing on the gallery outside the mozo's door.

But, you will say, perhaps the poison had been injected into him at some previous time—and that he had been in there slowly dying? Quite plausible.

And yet, here is another point: there was the mark of a blow upon the mozo's head; and the octo-ron woman swears she heard a blow.

"I reckon you did," I said, "and, believe me, I felt it."

"But it was another one," Cronk added. "I myself heard it as I was sitting downstairs there outside the judge's door. I heard you fall. And later I heard something more muffled in one of the rooms—the mozo's room, no doubt."

"We'll let it go at that," I said. "The mozo was killed instantly by a blow. I myself was slated to die in the same way, but by a miracle I escaped. You see, I made a lunge at the Thing, which it probably hadn't expected. And that saved me."

We went down and told Miss Shirley what had happened. I asked for the doctor, but she said he had left his room earlier in the night. Where he was, none of us knew.

And now I will tell you how we found Pythagoras Awls.

The next morning after the events I have just described, Cronk confided something to me.

He was, he said, on the verge of a nervous breakdown—or something worse. He felt that something inside his brain was crumbling, like a rotten shack—that it would collapse any moment. It was an actual physical sensation he had, of dryness inside his skull. His headache, he affirmed, had grown worse. He was unable to sleep.

"Four nights have passed," he said, "and some malignant spirit taking possession of the judge's body has walked each night. The deputy, that death cry of Pythagoras Awls, the mozo—I am to be be next."

I was startled at the quiet assurance, the resignation of his tone.

"I can tell," he said. "I have something of a gift to feel what's in the air. When I was a child I saw the figure of my uncle—even though, as my parents explained to me, he had been dead several hours."

"I would advise you to stop fooling with spirit photography and all this nonsense," I said.

"It is not necessary advice," he said quietly. "I won't touch that camera up there. If it betrayed any of the secrets of this haunted house it would be the last my

distracted brain could stand." Then he added firmly: "I'm withdrawing."

"A splendid idea," I said. "I advise it strongly. Don't think we'll blame you, or call you afraid. You've got reason enough to leave this place. What with that headache—"

"Ah, yes—that's it. The headache."

I looked at him anxiously. "You don't think—"

"Yes, I think I've been poisoned."

I pretended to show surprise at this. As a matter of fact, I had had a grave suspicion that my poor friend was in a very serious condition.

"It's that coffee I've been drinking," he said.

"I thought we'd exploded the coffee theory, now that the mozo's dead. He is one of the murdered—not the murderer."

"True enough. But there may be some one else who has been poisoning us."

"As a matter of fact, all the deaths thus far—except the judge's—have been sudden deaths. A violent attack."

"Not necessarily. You remember the doctor's idea that Deputy Marteau might have been drugged *before* his fall from the gallery. He was a pretty big man to be hurled over the banister without some sort of a tussle."

"Drugging first, then a coup to finish it," I said, "is that the procedure you think this murderer indulges in?"

"I'm not so sure but that you're right. Every death thus far—with, as I say, the exception of the judge's—corroborates that idea." After a moment he added: "And I'm not going to stay here for the final coup."

"I think you're very wise," I repeated. "And I would like to add, Tim, that it would be still wiser if you went to some good physician about that headache."

I remember he said calmly: "I have no hopes for that."

So Tim left us. I reported his withdrawal from the case to Miss Shirley, and she seemed to agree with the opinion at which Tim and I had both arrived—that he was withdrawing in the nick of time.

"But how about the photographs?" she asked.

"Are you still interested in that nonsense?" I replied.

"I am, very much interested."

"Very well, then. All we have to do is to take them to the druggists at Seven Bays. He'll develop them."

"I'll send Maizie with the film," she said.

Maizie left. And shortly afterward Dr. Zobel turned up.

The gaunt old gentleman showed the effects of a sleepless night—and likewise of some hard drinking.

We reported everything that had happened. "You see," I concluded, "our only two suspects are dead. The mozo has joined Pythagoras in the next world, taking their secret, whatever it was, with them."

The doctor was not as much taken aback as I expected. He showed no surprise whatever.

"I wonder who will be next?" was all he said.

"It might stand us in better stead to wonder who the murderer is," I remarked.

"Maizie is the only one left to suspect," he said.

The octofoon was the only one left as far as the doctor could see. But in my mind there was one other: The doctor himself.

Furthermore, in a wild stretch of the imagination which, needless to say was beyond my power, you could include Shirley Scudder as a third.

Maizie, the doctor, Shirley; there were the three which by a process of very definite elimination were left.

Shirley, and I myself in my less rational moments, added a fourth: the judge.

"Where is Maizie now," the doctor asked.

We told him that she had gone to town with the film. The doctor was enraged. She would get away. We had made a fatal mistake. The chances were a hundred to one that we would never see her again.

But he was wrong. Maizie returned early that afternoon bringing with her another proof—one that might almost be called conclusive—that Judge Scudder was the perpetrator of all the horrors we had seen.

"The druggist said it was a very queer film," the octofoon announced. She was visibly excited, and I saw, in the next moment, that she had very good cause to be.

She handed us a print of the film.

It gave an indistinct reproduction of the judge's bedchamber—the old carved four-poster bed with its bairés draped from the high posts in the manner of a canopy.

It showed the Spanish chest, the corner of one of the reed mats, the door to the closet. All these details however were very dark.

On the floor was a huddled heap of clothes in which you could barely distinguish the white kinky head of Pythagoras Awls. His black hands were partly opened, clutching the air like a bird's claws. His silk top-hat was near by, evidently having toppled from his head, and rolled to the floor.

Over this pile of clothes there was an elongated splotch of black, a sort of hovering form, topped by the white face of Judge Scudder.

The judge's eyes were closed; he looked exactly as he had looked the last time I had seen him in his tomb. It was the face of a dead man.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



Next week's Complete Novelette will be a vividly realistic tale of the open—

THE MAN HUNT

By FLORIA HOWE BRUESS

Do not fail to read this absorbing story of the fearless man who fired a shot and—fled.



An 800 to 1 Shot

By GORDON STILES

MRS. ANNA CONTI frowned and answered the buzzer. In the dim light of the dingy hall of her East Side flat, she could discern the outlines of a small man whose husky voice inquired: "Got any old bottles, lady? Got any newspapers or rags? Any old brass or copper—anyting you don't want? I pay good price for old stuff."

The woman considered for a moment. The Contis were thrifty people and she was far from loath to exchange anything which might be useless for the desirable American dollars which she and her husband, Joseph, had been pursuing so ardently for all the years they had been in this country. Joseph's vocation of general laborer did not provide much of a margin after living expenses were paid. And their goal was a truck farm somewhere in New Jersey or Connecticut.

Hastily running over in her mind their various possessions, she told the man: "Wait a minute." She disappeared into a closetlike arrangement at the end of the hall and presently called to the junkman to come. He found her looking critically at a

dilapidated heating stove with one broken leg.

Mrs. Conti asked: "How much you give?"

"One dollar," replied the other promptly.

The lady shook her head. "T'ree dollar," she demanded.

The man made a disparaging gesture and turned as if to leave. Then he paused, came back and said: "Two dollar," in tones most final. So Mrs. Conti said: "All right."

The purchaser tentatively lifted a corner of his property, shrugged his shoulders and made his way to the street. Two bleary-eyed men, lounging in the sunshine came slowly across at the junkman's hail.

He explained that a silver quarter awaited any one who would carry a small stove from the ground floor back to his wagon which stood at the curb and after a vain effort to raise the ante, the pair shuffled within and shortly reappeared, bearing the latest addition to the miscellaneous collection in the cart.

Mrs. Conti placed the two dollar bills in her stocking against the return from work

of Joseph. He would be glad to know that she had made so good a bargain.

II.

At the time when the above events were taking place, Mr. Samuel Tack sat in his East Sixth Street office, not far from Second Avenue, reading his morning paper. Presently he sighed, bit a little harder into the cheap cigar he was chewing and observed: "Ain't no percentage there."

He tossed the sheet aside with a slight grimace of disgust, stepped to the door of his domain, and surveyed the morning.

Sam frequently did this and when it happened, one who knew him well might safely conclude that business was in one of two conditions with Sam—very good or very rotten. In explanation of which it may be offered that when no profits were in the wind, Mr. Tack would stand in his doorway reflecting upon the general toughness of life; when a promising operation was under way, he found the same attitude favorable to the mental working out of his plans.

Many and varied were the enterprises that contributed to the well-being of Samuel Tack. Nothing was out of his line, nothing too small for his consideration, provided there was a respectable margin on the desirable side.

Also, it must be admitted that occasionally—very occasionally—he came a cropper. On the whole, he prospered, not because of his godliness, but because of his shrewdness.

Always Sam's eye was peeled for opportunity. He was as versatile as William Howard Taft and somewhat heavier. He assumed instantly and easily whatever rôle was necessary for the carrying out of his schemes and prided himself upon this ability.

If maudlin sympathy for a woman bereft of her husband would help Sam swing the order to an undertaker who would pay him a commission, he was there with brimming eyes. If enthusiastic activities in the plans for a great wedding party would result in the refreshments being furnished by a caterer known to Sam, that individual forthwith assumed the task of chief arranger.

Where business was concerned, Sam was busier than the "b" with which the word begins!

Reading the papers assiduously had turned out to be exceedingly profitable to Sam. You learned a lot from the papers—who was ill and likely to die, who had a second hand piano for sale, who wanted to dispose of a radio set—oh, lots of things.

This morning, standing there in his shop doorway, Sam allowed his thoughts to run along such channels as they chose; he was not working out anything. The life of East Sixth Street ran past him at its wonted pace; children bought two-cent hot dogs from oilcloth decked stalls.

Women haggled with push cart peddlers over the quality or price of divers vegetables. Ol' clo' men, bearing on their heads mighty towers of discolored hats, intoned their cries after the fashion of their kind. The sun shone and all was well.

An express wagon, drawn by a bony horse, creaked slowly along the paving. Out of the various aspects presented by the vehicle itself and its motley contents, two items registered in the retina of Mr. Tack's eyes. They were the name "Shapiro" painted in straggling letters on the side of the cart, and a particularly atrocious pot-bellied heating stove which comprised a part of the load.

Mr. Tack paid no attention to these matters; it was not for some time afterward that he realized that the above mentioned details had found a niche in his spacious brain.

III.

It was the morning of the following day and Sam's face was buried in his paper. He ran through the classified columns, paying particular attention to "Business Troubles." That department frequently steered Sam toward lucrative deals in second hand office furnishings.

One or two remote possibilities Sam marked for investigation, but he saw nothing that appeared very much alive. He then scanned the news columns religiously; suddenly paused, reread a certain story. After which he laid aside the sheet and

stared into the air directly in front of his eyes, brows knitted in fierce concentration. The item which had held Mr. Tack's interest follows:

LOSES LIFE SAVINGS IN OLD STOVE SALE

Wife Sells Heater With One Thousand Six Hundred Dollars Hidden Wealth For Two Dollars

When Joseph Conti, of —— First Avenue, returned from work last evening, his wife, Anna, met him at the door with a happy smile. Producing two one dollar bills, she thrust them into her husband's hand with the words: "Two more dollars for the farm, Joe."

"Where did you get them?" he asked.

"For that old stove in the back room. A sucker he was, the man who gave me two dollars for it."

Joseph's face had turned white even as his wife spoke. When she finished, the man rushed wildly into the room where the stove had stood, stared about him and collapsed in a heap on the floor, crying: "My God! The money for the farm! It was all in that stove! Oh, my God!"

A reporter for the *Blade* found the pair in an hysterical state. Mrs. Conti, it appears, had no idea of the identity of the junk dealer to whom she sold the stove containing the family savings of twenty years. She had known that her husband kept the money hidden, but did not dream that he had selected the old stove as a receptacle. The police are investigating the matter, but hold out slight hope of recovering the cash.

IV.

THE frown on Sam's face gave way to a satisfied smile. Swiftly the picture rose before him. The creaking wagon—the pot-bellied old stove—the name, Shapiro, in straggling letters. Enough to go on—for a person of cleverness.

Armed with a knowledge of the junkman's name, if Sam Tack couldn't beat the police to it, he was a bum! Anyhow, it was an eight hundred to one shot, well worth taking on!

There was, of course, the possibility that Shapiro had read the news story. But, in Sam's mind, that was astonishingly remote. He knew his section of the city; was aware that not one in a hundred could read English.

There might be a picture in the tabloids—a picture of the unfortunate Mrs. Conti. Promptly, Mr. Tack secured the sheets in question and sighed with relief when he found no photograph.

His chief worry was that the old stove might already have been broken up for junk. He took down the telephone directory and plunged into the long list of Shapiros.

It seemed to him that there were a million of them and that half of the lot were junk dealers or second hand men. Still, with that old horse and cart as a means of transportation, it was unlikely that the headquarters of the Shapiro he sought were very far afield.

Laboriously, Sam copied the addresses of the local and semi-local prospects. He would start out at once and make the rounds of the places on his list.

He must be careful, of course—to do nothing to excite suspicion. Above all, he must not appear anxious to have the stove should he be successful in locating it.

It was a weary morning for Sam. The first Shapiro to whom he paid his respects, presided over a wilderness of broken metal, discarded tires, dirty bottles—scattered about a boarded-in space close to the East River.

Sam inquired for the boss, but was told he was not present and on the plea of searching for odd lengths of lead pipe, Mr. Tack wandered about the premises for a good half hour. It was then he discovered that all of Mr. Shapiro's hauling was done by motor truck.

Which gave Sam an idea. Thenceforth, in approaching another potential benefactor, Sam immediately endeavored to interest the prospect in a new truck. By this method, he soon eliminated such as went in for mechanical transportation.

Nevertheless, the gentleman had visited eleven establishments before the call of hunger guided him into a small eating house not far from Chatham Square and well to the east. He eased his two hundred and forty pounds into a frail-looking chair and placed an order for goulash, dill pickles, and a cup of coffee. Over which satis-

factory repast the diner won back a certain amount of his wonted pep.

It had been a tough morning. Still, he was shooting for high stakes and he'd be a fool to abandon the chase without further exertion. For which decision, Mr. Tack was devoutly thankful less than an hour later.

Three more Shapiros had been crossed off the list before Sam came to the gloomy alley that ended his quest or, at least, bade fair to do so. Because the first object that met his eyes, as he approached the crazily sagging shop called for by his memorandum, was the familiar express wagon with its cock-eyed inscription!

Sam ran his finger around between collar and neck, moved forward slowly to avoid any appearance of haste and to offset the heavy breathing caused by his recent activities. He assumed a bored and cynical expression as he entered the door and addressed himself to the little rat of a man who sat trying to take the bend out of the spout of a more or less dilapidated coffee percolator.

"You Shapiro?" Sam inquired.

The other answered: "Yazz. Whatchou want?"

"You got any ol' copper? Ol' zinc? Scrap iron, mebbe?"

"Nein." Shapiro flipped the palms of his hands outward. "Ain't got it a pound. I clean oudt dis mornin'. Two ton, velleicht."

Mr. Tack groaned inwardly, but managed an impassive expression. "I gotta pick up a lot," he said. "Who you sell to?"

With beating heart he awaited the reply. Perhaps this fellow would tell him, perhaps not.

But the other answered, "Feldman. He take all my stuff. He's a jobber by T'reent Street an' Eas' River."

"T'ank you. I might get what I want offa him." Sam nodded a farewell and escaped as swiftly as decorum permitted.

V.

Now the trail was hot. Visions of sixteen hundred dollars, cash money, floated before Mr. Tack's eyes. Recklessly he hailed

a taxicab, but even at that, excitement caused his breath to come and go with unwonted rapidity as his conveyance drew up before the office of Heyman Feldman, jobber in scrap metals of all kinds. Cash paid for lots of any size.

Sam paid off the taxi driver, and regretted instantly that he had done so. If, perchance, he managed to acquire the stove he sought, he would take no chances by letting it out of his sight. However, he stepped inside with i's mind made up as to the exact course he meant to pursue with Feldman.

A clerk lounged at a tall desk. To him Sam said briskly, "I'm in the market for couple ton scrap iron—mebbe t'ree."

The clerk yawned. "Come in to-morrow," he said. "We ain't got a pound now."

"Ain't got a pound!" Sam repeated, as if the statement were utterly astounding. "Why—why—I jus' come from a feller named Shapiro, an' he says he sold you some to-day! Said I could get some here."

"Sure," the other returned languidly. "Sure. We had plenty a couple hours ago. But it's been shipped. All gone by the barge to Joisey."

"Who d' sell to in Joisey?" Sam inquired, striving to keep down his agitation.

"Curious as hell, ain't ya?" the clerk told him. "What business is it of yours where we sell our goods?"

"Honest, mister," Sam began, aware that he had been too eager. "I didn't mean nothin'. But I gotta hook on to some scrap, an' I thought mebbe the feller you sold to could help me out. That's my reason for asking, mister."

The man relented. "Fat chance you gettin' any stuff there. We sell to the North Atlantic Metals Company, Joisey City. They ain't in the sellin' game. They melt the stuff up."

Sam almost cried in his alarm. Sixteen hundred dollars being fed into the furnaces! But he said, "Thanks, mister. I'll have to go somewhere else."

"I'm in a big hurry." Dashing into the street, he looked wildly about for a taxi. He did not know what he would do in Jersey City. But he knew that Mrs. Conti's

bank roll would be given to the flames only over the unconscious form of Sam Tack!

VI.

At the imposing offices of the North Atlantic Metals Company Mr. Tack balked. Through the glass doors he could see important looking men with fifty cent cigars in their teeth, dapper clerks and distracting stenographers.

"I couldn't get away with nothin' with them highbrows," Sam told himself and withdrew a moment to consider.

A few yards along the street great double gates stood open for the entrance or exit of powerful trucks. Gazing down a vista of squat buildings from whose chimneys belched fire and smoke, Mr. Tack could see the yards by the water side, and, even then, two barges unloading their miscellaneous cargoes.

Instantly he determined what he would do. Approaching the burly gateman, he said with summoned deference, "Mind if I go this way? I'm from Feldman's, an' one o' my barges is down there."

"Sure," the man answered amiably. "That's all right." And Sam walked inside.

Almost before he reached the dingy wharf he spied the object of his search! There it stood—Mrs. Conti's stove! No doubt about it! Exactly as Sam had seen it yesterday in the Shapiro wagon!

But now the problem was to obtain possession! To that end the plan which had been forming in Sam's mind as he hurried through the yards, past the yawning foundries, whipped itself into shape. He chuckled at his own resourcefulness!

Carefully seeking out the man who seemed to be in charge, Sam ventured: "Say, mister. Wanta talk t' ya a minute."

The foreman lounged across to Sam's side. The latter pointed to the old stove.

"I'm from Feldman's, see," he began.

The man nodded. Quite possible Sam was from Feldman's.

"What of it?" he asked.

"Well. That stove there—it come in with a lot o' junk yesterday. An' over in our watchman's shanty we got one like

it, on'y it's broke. We could git the parts outa this one, see? They ain't makin the model any more, an' so I told the boys to put this one side—to use in fixin' the other, see?"

The man nodded again. Sam's explanation sounded perfectly reasonable.

"What you wanna do?" he inquired.

"I thought I'd ketch it," replied Mr. Tack. "So I hustled over here. I'll pay ya f'r the lost weight an' take the thing back."

The foreman hesitated. "I dunno," he began. "Did ya see 'em in the office?"

"No. What's the use o' botherin' 'em with a little t'ing like a bum stove? Looky here. I'll make it right with you. It'd cost us ten or fifteen bucks to fix the other stove. An' I'll slip ya five, if you'll dig up a wagon f'r me to cart it away in."

To Sam's horror the boss walked up to the stove.

"What's it made of, anyway?" he asked. "Gold?"

While Sam held his breath the curious one opened the door of the stove and poked about the balled up newspapers within!

Presently the door was closed again, but not before beads of perspiration stood copiously on Sam's forehead. What a chance! But the fellow had suspected nothing! If he had only dug deeply enough! Wow!

"I'm tryin' to be square with you," Sam said. "It's worth fifteen dollars to us, anyhow. Looky here, I'll slip you ten! I'm in a hurry; it's late now."

The man laughed. "All right. Heave over the ten."

Sam did. Fifteen minutes later, perched beside the owner-driver of a one ton truck, Mr. Tack gazed with thumping heart toward the Manhattan ferry slip into which the boat was nosing.

He really was in a terrible state of mind. He had not dared explore the interior of the stove, or give it more than an occasional glance. And, even though the prize was in his clutches, he knew he would worry until it was safely inside his shop—yes, until the cash had been removed and the old stove battered to pieces by his own hands!

By the time they rolled ashore at Cham-

bers Street it was dark. For which Sam gave thanks. Only thirty minutes or so longer, and—hello!

What the hell? Panic arose in the throat of the profit seeker. A burly traffic cop was shouting at the driver.

"Hey, you! Pull over there!" He indicated the curb. The driver swore softly under his breath and obeyed!

Sam debated whether to cut and run. What a fool he had been not to cover the stove with a tarpaulin or something. He had known that the police were on the lookout for a stove such as this, and this cop had spotted it!

Visions of the station house, of a cell in the Tombs, of a cold-eyed judge, rose quite as vividly as had Mr. Shapiro's equipage registered yesterday morning! Sam broke into a cold sweat as the officer leisurely made his way across to where the truck stood!

Looking up at the driver in the most approved contemptuous manner, the bluecoat inquired; "Who the hell do you think you are, anyhow?"

After the manner of his kind—if they had had been well-trained—the driver answered nothing; just waited. Sam's horrified eyes saw those of the policeman travel to the sorry-looking stove and back again. He waited despairingly for what followed.

The officer said, out of the corner of his mouth, "Youse Joisey guys t'ink you can get away wid murder, don't you?"

Then the driver spoke up.

"What's the row about, officer? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong! Get down outa there an' give a look at y'r number plate. How th' hell y' gonna read it—hangin' by one wire?"

"I didn't know it was loose."

"That's what they all say! I damn good mind ta give ya a ticket. *Get down an' fix it! Get a move on!*"

The relieved victim scrambled quickly down from his seat. Sam was glad of this. It afforded him an opportunity of collecting his wits.

And presently he found himself in his own establishment, door locked and shades drawn! With trembling hands he pulled

open the stove door, plunged his fingers among the litter in the fire pot!

Papers! More papers! Cardboard boxes! Ah! Something soft! Sam pulled it out. An old sock—empty! With both hands he scooped out the contents of the receptacle. The stuff ought to be near the bottom, anyway, he surmised.

Little by little the emptying process progressed, until finally the searching fingers of Mr. Tack scratched nothing save fire clay and metal!

He thrust an electric torch into the bowels of Mrs. Conti's stove. Nothing there! Dumfounded, he poured through the mess on the floor! In the end he sat weakly in a chair, staring at his purchase!

"Oy! Oy!" he groaned. "*Versetkt! Versetkt!*"

Sam knew the loss of some thirty dollars would not break him. He would get it back all right. Only—only—who in the devil had abstracted the money? He could sleep better if that were explained.

Wild notions of going back over the route on the morrow came to his mind. If he could go down the line, threatening every one with exposure if a split was not forthcoming, he might yet cut in on the profits.

That was his last thought before falling asleep.

VII.

HABIT is a strong master. On the day after his Jersey adventure Mr. Tack shook out his morning paper—at quite the usual time. Also, as usual, he perused the classified material first. Then a glance at the news. There it was—on the second page:

FREAK OF FATE AIDED BY 'HOOCH' RETURNS LOST WEALTH

Pair Find Selves Millionaires For Day

Prosperity Proves Fatal

Two men, describing themselves as John Smith and Fred Jones, of no address, were picked up last night in Battery Park after Smith had endeavored to crash the doors of the Aquarium, declaring that he was a sea lion and wanted to go to bed.

Evidently the pair had been engaged in a

long session with Bowery Smoke as the principal recreational element. What puzzled the police was the presence in Jones's pocket of some fifteen hundred dollars in cash. In view of the disheveled appearance of the men, they were held on an open charge while the latest reports of robberies were scanned.

Later, when the prisoners recovered sufficiently to talk with partial coherence, they told a rambling story of having found the money in an old stove which a junk dealer had hired them to remove from a house in First Avenue. In handling the stove, Smith said, he and Jones had turned it on its side. The door flew open and what appeared to be a mass of newspapers fell out. Jones declared that in replacing these, his hand came in contact with something which turned out to be a roll of bills wound with a rubber band. This he slipped into his pocket and,

since the incident, he and Smith had been celebrating their luck.

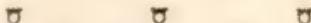
Upon investigation, the police discovered that this wild story coincided with that told by a Mrs. Anna Conti, who had reported the loss of sixteen hundred dollars through the sale of an old stove in which her husband had hidden the money. The cash was restored, greatly to the relief of its owners.

Sam leaned back in his chair and sighed. Then, digging into his pockets, he drew out a torn bit of newspaper, scanned it:

FOR SALE—One small second-hand safe.
Owner going out of business.

"I wonder," Sam mused, "could I sell it to Mr. Conti."

THE END



THE WINDING ROAD

THE long and straight road lies ahead
In one unchanging line
Without a single challenge
To the fancies that are mine.

In one intense monotony
It follows on its course—
No curves to cause illusions,
No imagination's source.

But on the twisting, winding road
Each curve inspires a dream.
Will each new bend unfold to view
A fairer scenic scheme?

What new sensations lie in wait
Beyond the curve ahead?
A scene to make my pulses leap—
Or sadden me instead?

So give to me the winding road
With prospects unforeseen,
For one who courts adventure
In a world that's too serene.

Lester Raymond Cash.



Alkali

By CHARLES FRANCIS COE

Author of "Moonglow," "The Rider o' Spook Hollow," etc.

CHAPTER XXIV (*Continued*).

CIMARRON JONES.

THE absolute calm of the lad and the certainty of his attitude rather shattered Jones's confidence. He dampened his lips with his tongue, raised his right hand toward his gun ever so little, then stood staring into Jimmie's eyes.

"If yuh ain't got the nerve tuh finish what yuh started, Mr. Roarin' Jones," Jimmie taunted, "I'm willin' tuh help! I'll do it just fer you, see? You ain't a liar—you're a damn liar!"

The words fell as sharply on the clear air as the very shots that followed them. As they sounded, men all over the town tensed, their eyes alight with excitement. For one brief fleeting second, almost comparable to that moment of stillness before a theater curtain rises, Jones did not move. Then his hand flashed and his gun glinted in the rising sun.

Jimmie had been watching. When it

came time to shoot he did not hesitate. Brant was the first to see the superb manner in which he drew and fired from the hip. Jimmie himself saw the look of defeat leap into Jones's eyes. He saw those eyes change. They widened first, then grew bright with a light of fear; of unbelief that Jones had met a man faster with a weapon than himself.

Jimmie fired and he fired to kill. He saw that a queer, gaping spot appeared directly between Jones's eyes. It looked blue to him and there was no blood that he could see; more like a bruise, it appeared, than a wound.

It seemed that the man hung suspended by some lingering desire to live; a long, long time it seemed to Jimmie before he saw that body settle toward the earth. And, when it had fallen, and the bruised face groveled into the dust, Jimmie knew that it must have been but a very short time, for he stood and watched as Jones's hand trembled, jerked, and three shots bored in-

to the dusty road, dust clouds leaping into the air and settling again over the gun which had fired its last shot from another world.

"Gawd A'mighty!" Gabel muttered from the porch of the gambling hall.

"Yuh got the guts, awright, Hell Bend," Brant said, now at Jimmie's side. "Gawd knows yuh have!" There was a pleased note in his voice.

Some one on the porch thrust Gabel aside and came out into the open. It was Miles, his hair rumpled and his clothes showing that the sound of the shots had taken him from his blankets. In one sweeping glance he saw what had happened. The still body of Cimarron Jones caused his jaw to drop in amazement.

Jimmie walked toward the man.

"Hello, Mr. Miles," he said. "I guess I kinda followed you out o' the valley!"

"You!" Mason gasped unbelievingly. "You! Well—what thuh—by the livin' Gawd—you!" He ran a hand over his eyes as though endeavoring to remove from them some hallucination which had become etched upon his vision. When he looked again he said: "Yuh don't mean tuh tell me this kid is Hell Bend Mason!"

"If anybody has got doubts about that, Miles," Brant spoke up, "he ain't fired but one shot out'n that gun!"

Absolute silence greeted the words and, after a moment, Brant continued: "I want it knowned that Hell Bend an' me are pards!" he said. "There's apt tuh be some new deals around this here town!"

Then he slipped his arm through Jimmie's and they walked back toward Mulvey's. Silence still gripped the town as Jones's friends went to him and performed their final services.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SECOND GENERATION.

THE tragic passing of Cimarron Jones had its effect upon the town. It became epic. A thousand times Jimmie himself heard it related by men who had witnessed the affair. Cimarron had enjoyed a huge reputation and the laurels of victory

over him added just so much to Jimmie's fame and the luster thereof.

Miles came to him shortly as he sat on the rail fence that made the corral behind Mulvey's place. He found Brant talking earnestly to the lad and the man scowled a little as Miles appeared. To this, Miles took instant exception.

"It's a good day fer shootin', Brant!" he snapped. "I never did know yuh, I admit, till they told me how yuh stopped Gabel from cheatin' Jimmie an' then Jimmie told yore name! I ain't got a hell o' a lot o' use fer yuh an' if it's gun-play yuh want—I'll accommodate yuh quick!"

"It ain't!" Brant admitted. "I told Jimmie I was plumb sorry about that deal I tried to run on you an' his old man!"

Miles disdained to answer, but turned to Jimmie.

"Jimmie," he said, something of a smile churning his lips into motion, "I can't git used tuh callin' yuh that Hell Bend name! Tuh me I guess yuh'll allus be just a damn nice, quiet kid! But yuh shore salivated a hellion this mornin' an' yuh're goin' tuh be famous fer it! I wanna talk with yuh—alone!"

As he finished he glanced suggestively at Brant and the man slipped from the rail, shrugged, and turned away. Over his shoulder, though, he called to Jimmie: "I guess yuh got sense enough tuh know I'm yore pard!" he said.

"Come over tuh my place, Jimmie," Miles invited. "I shore got heaps tuh palaver about!"

Nothing loath, Jimmie crossed the street where, such a short time before, he had met and conquered death. Something of the fame which was to rise from the ugly dust he trod, came to him as men cheered him openly for the fight he had fought. Miles led him through the almost deserted place and into a small room at the back.

"This here is my office, Jimmie," he said. "I've fergot whether yuh smoke er not." As he spoke he slid a large glass jar containing cigars and tobacco toward the lad. Jimmie rolled a cigarette not too cleverly. Miles seemed not to miss his awkwardness though he gave no direct evidence of having noticed it.

"I'll never fergit thuh day I picked yuh up from under that steer, Jimmie," he said suddenly. "I thought shore yuh was dead. Yore father had run off an' was poundin' the steer with his bare fists! It was hell! I never dreamed then that yore broken arm would make yuh the gun-fighter yuh are to-day!"

Jimmie laughed a little but made no other reply. He was finding it hard to talk. He saw that these men used different words than he and that they put them into different methods of expression. When he talked it seemed to him to advertise his inexperience in worldly matters.

"This is a country where things happen fast as hell," Miles said after a time. "There ain't room fer them that can't keep up a gallopin' pace! Yore father, Jimmie, can't gallop!"

"He's got the idee o' farmin'," Jimmie returned slowly. "He won't quit. Alkali ruined him!"

"Ruined 'im? There ain't no ruin in this country fer a gent that 'll git out an' fight, Jimmie!" Miles cried vehemently. "If success ain't one place, why in hell don't he move tuh another? There ain't nothin' in this whole country but success! If he'd move over them damned mountains a hun'nerd miles, his cattle would grow fat!"

"He can't see it," Jimmie muttered lugubriously. "We had a fight after you left. I quit him. I've come in here fer some o' the success you're talkin' about. When I git it, I'll go back fer the women."

"Women?" Miles asked—"Betty, too?"

"Yes."

"I oughta do somethin' fer Betty," Miles said. "O' course, a place like this ain't no place fer her!"

"You leave her alone," Jimmie said earnestly. "I'll look after Betty!"

"What d'yuh mean—you will?"

"I will! We got it fixed—she won't go away with you!"

Once again, as he had back in the valley on his last trip there, Miles recognized the value of silence and the futility of words. He quickly changed the subject though the line which had appeared on his forehead at that moment lingered for some time.

"How close are yuh with this Brant, Jimmie?" he asked.

"I met him here. He stuck by me when Gambel tried to cheat me an' when I fought Jones, too!"

"Is that all? Yuh ain't had no business with him?"

"Business? Nope. I ain't had business with anybody. That's what I'm lookin' fer—I want to make money."

"I see." There was a note of relief in Miles's tone as he went on: "I asked yuh about it because I heard what he said 'bout you an' him bein' pards."

"He said it—I didn't!"

"That's right! I said a few minutes ago that this here was a place where things happen fast! A ready gun is the best damn law this country knows! Yuh got a big name, Jimmie—an' that's worth money tuh me!"

"Money? What do you mean?"

"Well; folks is apt tuh come in here an' git messy, Jimmie. Every place like this has tuh have a well known gunfanner tuh hang around an' kinda keep folks from shootin'. We gotta have women fer thuh men tuh dance with, but thuh women git 'em riled up easy an' then the gunfanner keeps 'em quiet, see?"

"I heard what yuh done tuh that miner what was singin' about settin' this place halfway tuh Laramie! He went an' ain't come back since! That's what we need. Just knowin' how yuh kin shoot keeps folks from shootin', see?"

Jimmie did not quite understand where Miles was making for. He raised an inquiring glance and the man hastened along:

"There ain't no room fer Brant, though! The truth is, I don't like thuh way he said that about new deals in this town! I just about made this town! I'm gettin' rich damned fast here. When Brant gits hisself hitched up with a great gun-fighter an' starts throwin' hints about runnin' the town—it's time tuh git busy!"

"You mean he wants me to—"

"I guess he wants yuh tuh start a place with him, Jimmie!" Miles lunged on, now warmed to that which caused him worry. "He didn't dare do it until you come along an' he seen yuh throw a gun!"

Something of the traditional Mason caution came to Jimmie's befuddled head about that time. It was as though the father in him, with its innate honesty and its doggedness, gained momentary control of his deliberations.

"It ain't all clear to me, Mr. Miles," he said after a minute or so, "just what is it yuh want me tuh do?"

"I want yuh tuh come in here with me. Send this damned thief on his way, Jimmie; this Brant! He can't cause yuh nothin' but trouble anyhow! I'll start yuh off makin' good money quick!"

"I'll let you know to-day," Jimmie said slowly. "I ain't ready right now to say what I'll do."

"Yuh goin' tuh talk with Brant?" Miles demanded suspiciously.

"I reckon I will," Jimmie admitted. "I don't know why, exackly—'ceptin' he stood by me—"

"Yuh ain't already made up yore minds tuh start a place?"

"Nope. I don't think I even want a place like this! I gotta think this out. I'll let you know."

Miles tried again to restrain him, to talk more of what he had in mind, but Jimmie proved adamant and left the place in a thoughtful frame of mind. Brant was waiting for him and asked him to drink. Jimmie shook his head negatively.

"What did he say?" Brant asked, obviously referring to Miles.

"Brant," Jimmie said, heedless of the question, "I'm goin' to ask you somethin'. What are your plans? Was you figgerin' that you an' me would start a place here in this town?"

"So he guessed it out, did he?" Brant snarled. "Well, what of it, Hell Bend? Who's tuh stop us an' who's tuh say we ain't got as much right here as him? We'll git rich damned quick, with yore name!"

"You been plannin' that ever since we met up, Brant?"

"Well, no. I really did want tuh square myself with yuh when I seen Gambel misscountin' yore stacks. But after yuh drawed that gun I seen what we could do here in town. An' when yuh salivated Jones this mornin', I knowed it would be a cinch!"

"You was thinkin' ahead all the time, Brant!" Jimmie said slowly.

"Shore! Why not?" the man asked.

"It's all right. I ain't kickin' at all—I'm just wakin' up a mite. I gotta think ahead, too. Know what Miles said awhile back? He said he couldn't bring his daughter to a place like this—"

"I don't blame him," Brant sneered. "No man would!"

"Then," Jimmie said, and his tone was argumentative with the thoughts that had been passing through his own mind, "why should I build up such a place? I'm buildin' a place to take Betty an' ma, both!"

"Well," Brant argued, "git yore start this way. When yuh git money—start another kind o' place! Others has done it!"

"What others?"

"Well—heaps o' others," Brant fenced.

"Tell me some," Jimmie insisted.

"Hell, I don't 'member all their names. What's the idee o' pickin' at me?" Brant complained.

"Name me just one," insistently.

Brant was pinned down. He could not name one. Then again, the elder Mason showed in Jimmie. He thought things out with the same stolid, unshakable obstinacy and clarity of purpose. He said: "Brant, there ain't none. That's why you can't name 'em. Miles himself couldn't quit his place if he had a fortune. There's somethin' about the life; somethin' about the loud talk an' the women an' the gold an' the gamblin'—"

"Git a prayer book," Brant sneered, braving for a moment the possible anger he might arouse in his keen disappointment at the collapse of his well-laid plan.

But Jimmie showed no trace of anger. He went on doggedly:

"I'm right, Brant," he said. "Sure as shootin', I'm right. That was the first drink I ever had, that one I took with you. I never gambled before, either. It ain't life to do them things. Last night look what I lost! That'd buy more cattle'n we could eat in ten years—an' cattle breed fast!"

"Yeah," Brant sneered, "yore old man was goin' into thuh cattle business, too."

"He was right. He got the wrong place

an' he lost his head when things went wrong."

"Who's made any money outa cattle?" Brant demanded.

"Lots o' folks is goin' to—an' I'm goin' to be one o' them!" Jimmie announced in determined tone. "I'd like this kinda life too good if I stayed around, Brant. I'm goin' on in to Laramie an' see what I can find to start me off right."

Brant argued, but to no avail. Jimmie was as unshakable, once decided, as his father was. The course of the argument veered now and then, but Brant was not adroit enough to change it for long. Jimmie Mason had decided, and it was as though the mountains had settled into their sleep of ages.

Later that day Jimmie returned to Miles: "I ain't goin' to work with you, Mr. Miles," he said flatly. "I'll be leavin' town in an hour an' ridin' to Laramie. I aim to git into the cattle business some time."

"Brant goin' with yuh, Jimmie?" Miles asked, and even Jimmie caught the relief in his voice.

"I dunno. I ain't asked him. He kin if he wants. Brant is a great cattle man, he'd git along good if he'd stick to it."

Suddenly Miles threw back his head and laughed uproariously. Jimmie stood silent until the man quieted his mirth, then looked an inquiry.

"'I aim tuh go intuh thuh cattle business,'" Miles quoted, a little mockingly. "Damned if yuh ain't the second gen'ratin, awright!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

WINTER.

JIMMIE MASON walked silently away from Miles, out into the dust of the street and across to Mulvey's. Brant was still there, and his first glance at the lad carried a vagrant hope that Jimmie had changed his mind. One look at the set of the chin; the determined walk Jimmie used, however, and that light of hope disappeared.

Brant watched as Jimmie saddled his pony.

"You breakin' away, Hell Bend?" he asked, trying to speak casually.

"Goin' to Laramie, Brant," Jimmie answered; "I'd like fer you to quit callin' me Hell Bend."

Brant poised himself on the rail of the corral and rolled a cigarette. The sun was sinking fast and a cold, raw wind sprang up. He had difficulty with his paper and tobacco, but finally inhaled deeply. By that time Jimmie was ready to go.

"Brant," he said, "you're about the best cattle man I ever heard of. Why'n't you come along with me? We'll go into Laramie way an' see what we can do."

Brant shrugged. "I know what yuh kin do without goin' there," he growled; "yuh kin ride herd fer thuh winter an' then go cruisin' fer grazin' land next spring."

"That 'll do me," Jimmie said simply. "It 'll be a start, Brant. He held out his hand and they clasped. "Better come along, Brant."

The man shook his head and puffed his smoke. Jimmie swung into the saddle and out of the corral. The dust eddied about his pony's feet and was caught by the wind and swept away. It was cold, and Jimmie's mind went back to all the winters that had passed back in the valley.

He thought of his mother, of Betty, pictured them in the big room of the house. His father would be there, too. No one would be saying anything probably. His mother would be sewing, after night came and her other work was done. Betty would be doing the same thing, and, he hoped, thinking of him.

His conscience cleared with the knowledge that he had cast aside offers to remain in a world of tinsel and gold. Responsibility for his own future gripped him just as it had his father years ago. Instead of a Conestoga there was but a horse, instead of a wife and child, there were those things to be won. But the sense of responsibility was huge, he found.

A longing came to him for that day when he could ride into the valley and say that he owned his own place, too; that he was ready to take his bride there and that it was not hidden away from all things of the world as was the valley.

The wind grew bitter as the darkness came and Jimmie was carried back anew to visions of the valley and the house. Even the smell of his father's pipe came to him; it was a different smell than any other. He had always associated it with supremacy, with dictatorial power, and as it filled his nostrils he actually knew homesickness.

He knew just how the valley looked, he thought. He could see the brown grass as it cringed under the bite of the raw wind. He could hear the howl of the wolf and the bark of the fox with, now and then, the tramping of the black tail deer in the brakes of the woodland.

With all that picture impressed upon his mind by the thrill of the things which had come to him in Faro, he caught sight of the first snowflake. It came, just as they always seemed to him to come, from nowhere. Suddenly it was there, as though it had been there all the time.

It bred upon itself, in a sense, for others appeared. They settled gently to earth so softly, so quietly, that they appeared to be coming surreptitiously until their hold upon the earth might be strong enough to warrant open warfare. The first few struck the ground and quickly melted, as though they were proving that winter was a myth.

Then the air filled more rapidly with them. They fell upon the pony's ears; clung to Jimmie's hand, where they melted and left a drop of water that might have been a tear at their passing. He glanced at his shoulder and saw that the flakes, big flakes, were clinging there as though reluctant to settle finally into the motionless blanket they must make.

Here and there little streaks of white appeared along the ground, perhaps beside a log, where the wind whipped the flakes more rapidly than they melted. There they piled up and the piles grew in size and crept outward until the impression of earth changed from streaks of white to streaks of dark and the first snowstorm had come to shield the ground throughout the long winter.

"Gee, I hope they're warm," Jimmie mused, his mind unable to leave the people at the valley. After all, he thought, a great deal could happen in one of those long win-

ters! He wondered if the Indian trapper had brought to the valley as much buffalo meat as he did each year before.

He urged his pony on at a faster gait because the snow was getting deeper with each minute. He knew how long it might last; how completely those great, soft flakes might weave into a single blanket that would envelop the world about him. But there was a fascination about the ride; about the softly falling snow. He was not immune to it; it gripped his thoughts and gave rise there to dreams of the future.

Despite all that had happened at Faro he was content. Some philosophical bent in his make-up pointed out that what Brant had said about learning and living, was sound. The world was a greater thing than he; he told himself that when events seized a man in their clutches he ceased to be responsible.

He had been riding for perhaps two hours when the sound of hoofs came to him across the snow-filled night. They seemed to be coming from the direction of Faro, and he drew aside that he might let the rider overtake him. As he waited the snow streaked past him like white lights being cast against a black screen.

Soon the hoofbeats drew close. Through the night he caught sight of the rider who appeared like some phantom of the storm. His body, tinted white by the snow that clung to his garments, was clearly visible, while his face, where of course the snow melted, was unseen.

"Jimmie!" a voice called. "Hey, I say there, Jimmie!"

Jimmie called back, and the rider uttered a grunt of satisfaction.

"Ain't this a real snow, though?" the man queried. "Come quick, too—an' me 'thout winter clothes! But 'tain't too cold. I changed my mind, see? Changed it—Well, why'n hell don't yuh say somethin', Jimmie?"

"I'm glad fer to see you, Brant," Jimmie said easily—"right glad. You're the best cattleman I ever knew of, an' we'll go a long ways when a chance comes."

"Yuh damn fool!" Brant muttered; and there were many things in his voice, though none of them was offense.

They rode on, neither speaking. Mason found that to have a companion who has cast his lot in with your judgment is to serve as a bolster to one's confidence. He scarcely sensed that this was so, but in true Mason fashion he assumed, perhaps presumed, that leadership had been accorded him.

Without mentioning his thoughts to Brant, he began planning not alone what he would do, but also what they would do.

They reached Fort Laramie, and were received with gusto. All about the plains there were wintering wagons of every description, and the place itself had altered greatly since the days of Jimmie's recollection. They learned that many of the wagons they saw had been left where they were to stand until they should have rotted into the ground.

Riders were constantly coming into the place for supplies, and scarcely a day passed that supply trains did not arrive from the East. News of the war was avidly received, and Jimmie learned that many of the soldiers had been called East and were engaged in fighting the South.

On every hand there was talk of gold and of cattle. Tired-looking men appeared at the fort and showed pokes well filled with gold that they had salvaged from the hills, leaving in exchange for it the straightness of their shoulders, the youthful gleam of their eyes, the natural buoyance of life that fades so quickly in the solitudes.

Men talked of land in the thousands of acres; of cattle in the thousands of head. Jimmie heard tales of the long cattle drives that men had made. He learned of the trouble ranchers were having with rustlers, and there was talk of forming vigilantes whose duty it would be to wage a war on the rustlers.

He sensed that his father had led him into the fastness of an empire asleep, and that now he had come to an empire rousing itself. It seemed to him that the great plains, like a sleeping buffalo, had roused to the power of its own might, and was even then shaking off the fetters of centuries and lumbering to its feet to stand before the world as the newest and greatest of frontiers.

He caught the fever; felt the beating pulse of tremendous things; drank in avidly the stirring breath of life and progress.

He found work with one Frederick Ralston, whose name was soon to be emblazoned across the hide of thirty thousand wandering steers. All during the winter he worked among the herd; learned much about cattle; perfected himself in the ways of a rancher.

His mind seldom left the valley where his mother and Betty waited. Now and then he was referred to as Hell Bend Mason, but his reputation gained at Faro served the noble purpose of keeping him from trouble and gave him hours in which to think and to plan. Yet, when all was said and done, that thinking and planning was pitiable in its futility.

The more he thought, the less he saw his way clear. He had no money with which to buy cattle; he had no land, no horses, no equipment. The result was that his thoughts grew not as thoughts, but as dogged determination. He was going into the cattle business. That became his Bible.

Spring came, and Ralston drove his herd north toward the Black Hills. On all sides Jimmie heard that, once beyond the Bad Lands and over the hills, the prairie spread for endless miles, an ideal grazing ground, a perfect land for cattle.

Brant continued with him when the great drive started out. He did so complainingly, but he did so. He frequently resorted to calling Jimmie a "damned fool"; yet he clung to Jimmie's determination even as Jimmie did himself. Naturally weak of nature, he was attracted to Jimmie's strength of will.

They journeyed northward slowly, the cattle fattening on the bunch grass even as they traveled. Brawls among the men were frequent; card playing cost the lives of two cowboys; liquor appeared mysteriously among the riders, and Ralston had his hands full in controlling them; but with the implacable force of its awakening the West grew, and in the growing seemed of its own volition to push that herd ever onward.

As Jimmie drew nearer the land where

lay the valley, his longing to see Betty and his mother became inexpressibly enlarged. He felt that he had to see them; felt that he must know that they had stood the winter well, and encourage them in their faith that he would return for them in good time and free them from the soulless existence of the alkali valley.

He spoke of this to Brant, and was surprised when the fellow agreed to go with him.

"Let's ride off by ourselves, Jimmie," he said eagerly. "We'll strike into the hills an' make fer yore valley. We oughta git there in ten days, hadn't we? I'm damn sick o' ridin' these ranges with this gang! Mebbe we'll meet up with something else in the hills!"

"You're allus huntin' excitement, Brant," Jimmie said frankly, "an' it ain't never goin' to help you to git it! I'm aimin' to see the folks a bit, then come back here. This is the finest cattle country ever!"

"Ride," Brant grumbled. "I'll go with yuh just fer luck!"

Jimmie spoke to Ralston. He told him of his ambition to make a start for himself, and said that he would come back to him after seeing the people at the valley, if he found it possible to do it. Though the man complained at losing a hand or two, he finally acceded and paid Jimmie his winter's salary in gold.

Jimmie smiled ruefully as he found that it amounted to less than a hundred dollars after deductions had been made. Brant took even less than that, because he had spent more. Then Ralston wished Jimmie luck, and told him that, should he come back, there would be work for him.

"An' if yuh hit 'er rich, Mason," he finished laughingly, "I'll sell yuh some cattle fer tuh start out with."

Jimmie overlooked the laugh. It was all terribly real to him, this striving for a start that would bring luxury to those he loved. He had grown somber of mien just thinking about it.

That afternoon Brant and himself set out for the hills to the east. As each hour passed Jimmie grew less communicative and more tense, more eager for their ar-

rival, and his first sight of Betty and his mother. And he was obliged to admit it to himself, much as it surprised him, he wanted to see his father too. He wanted to know that they had wintered well and that the man was safe. There was an inescapable strength about his father. He knew that now. He wished that he could talk frankly with him.

About a week later they breasted a hill, and before them opened the valley with its two log houses, its lean-to, its litter of farm implements. The stream flowed, swollen by spring freshets, through the bed of the valley. A spiral of blue smoke rose from the chimney of the main house.

Eagerly Jimmie cast his eyes over the place, a soft cry coming to his lips. Then, far down to the south of the valley, he caught sight of a familiar figure. He knew the clothes that it wore, the stoop of the great shoulders, the ceaseless energy of body that was his father's.

"Pa!" he said softly. "That's pa down there, Brant!"

"Yeah," Brant said, "an' he'd shore blow me tuh hell if he seen me, huh? I'll wait up here till yuh finish this here love call, Jimmie. When yo're ready tuh leave, come this way. I'll enjoy waitin', so don't hurry."

The valley seemed sacred to Jimmie Mason. That figure down below was unlike any figure he ever had known. There was a definite majesty about his father; the very valley whispered of his powers and the things which he had done.

"Mebbe I better had go in alone, Brant," he said. "This here is like to s'prise 'em all some."

"I'll be moseyin' round, seein' what I kin see," Brant said. "I'll be here when yuh come out."

His eyes fastened upon the house now, Jimmie made no answer other than a nod of his head signifying that he understood. They had approached the valley through the mountains, and they now stood at the rugged, rocky hills into which none of them had penetrated during their life there.

But the pony took the down trail without trouble, and Jimmie found himself urging the little animal on rather than hold-

ing him in for fear of accident. He reached the valley bed itself without, apparently, being seen. Or had his father seen him and ignored his coming?

Soon the sounds of some one at work in the house reached his ears. He kicked his heels against his pony's sides. Suddenly his mother stood framed in the doorway, and he saw her brush her hair back from her eyes in a manner characteristic of her. He gulped, started to call out his joy.

Then he saw her hand stop in mid air, her gaze fasten upon him.

"Jimmie!" she called. Not loudly, not frantically, but with a note in her voice that twisted her very soul.

"Ma!" he said. "Ma!" And not knowing how he did it, he was off his pony, and her small form was crushed close against his chest.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHISPERINGS ADRIFF.

THE two stood thus for several moments. No words were spoken; there seemed an understanding, a sentiment between them, which would have been blasphemed by attempted expression. Jimmie felt a hand on his arm presently, and saw that Betty had come to them and was looking up into his face with a sort of awe in her eyes.

He loosed one arm and passed it about the girl, drawing her into a double embrace. Somehow he appeared big as he held the two thus. The mother was weeping very softly; he could feel her wasted body tremble in the throes of her joy. Tears came to Betty's eyes, and Jimmie himself admitted a vast lump in his throat which blocked effectually all attempts at words.

It was the girl who broke the silence. "You come back!" she said. "You come back, Jimmie! I'm right glad!"

He leaned over then and kissed her, and she clung to him as she never had before. He sensed that life in the valley had been harder upon the women than ever before. It struck him that, perhaps, he had been cowardly in leaving them as he had. It seemed to him now that the proper thing

to have done was to take a definite stand when he himself had left the valley—a stand that they should go with him.

His mother was standing on tiptoe, that her wrinkled cheek might rest against his own in a silent caress that twisted his heart strings. He leaned down and kissed her again and again. Suddenly she was laughing through her tears.

"I reckon I'm plumb foolish, Jimmie," she said presently, raising the corner of her worn apron to wipe her eyes, "but it's kinda nice—kinda surprisin'—"

Once again she dropped close to him, hiding her features against his chest, and he patted her shoulder. Hardly had he adopted that form of caress than it came to him that he often had seen his father do the same thing. He stopped as though his hand might have been burned, then began again, falteringly, as though he was deliberately fighting the impulse to be unlike the father, from whom he had separated in anger.

Suddenly his mother straightened, her face aglow with control and happiness: "We'll be goin' in, Jimmie," she smiled. "Lan' sakes, standin' here like we was lost souls!"

Each of them caught one of his arms and led him inside. His nostrils were fairly overwhelmed by familiar smells. Across the screen of his memory raced multitudinous recollections. He felt his heart beating more rapidly; somehow he knew that he was home. That nowhere else on earth was there a spot which held for him the glories that clung to this blackened cabin, this desolate valley.

A pot was hanging over low flames in the fireplace. The great log table still stood in the center of the room. His father's chair bulked before the hearth just as it always had, and on the table he saw the black pipe from which his parent had made smoke rings when he and Betty were children watching with thrilled countenances!

His nostrils caught again the very odor that pipe emitted. Before his eyes danced a picture of his father as he had seen him through the years of his boyhood. Sitting before the murky hearth, he seemed; the smoke clouds lingering about his great head,

the smell of earth pungent in his clothing, his hands stained from toil, his whole posture one of silent brooding, tormented ambition.

"Gee!" he half gasped. "The house is just the same as allus, ma!"

"It don't change much," the woman agreed. "It's like the farm, and the valley, Jimmie—but you're hungry, I bet! I'll be fixin' a snack!"

Immediately she busied herself and, as she worked, Jimmie found himself watching her, measuring every thing that she did against the certainty of his recollection. Her every move was familiar; he knew just how she would look as she walked across the room; as she worked at the fireplace; as she set out the few dishes that remained to them.

"We was expectin' the trapper in right soon," she said, much as though explaining why the repast might not be complete. "You're pa's tobacco is almost gone, even! It's right hard to be always dependin' on an Injun!"

Once again she laughed softly and the sound seemed, inexplicably, to wrench Jimmie's heart. Somehow he was glad that his father was not there. He dreaded meeting the man. From the things which he had discovered within himself he sensed that Mason would be hard, unforgiving. He wondered if his mother, too, did not fear that meeting.

Betty had settled herself beside Jimmie when the latter sank into a chair. She sat, now, with her arm over his shoulder, and he felt again the sense of bliss that contact with her had provided through all his remembered existence. He wondered why she did not speak more often.

"You glad I come back, Betty?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes. You bet I am! It was a hard winter here. Ma won't stand many more, Jimmie!"

"Shucks! What nonsense!" the woman interjected. "Lan' sakes, I'm fit as a fiddle!"

"You ain't, ma," Betty snapped frankly, "you know you ain't! She can't hardly drag herself 'round, Jimmie!"

"I'm aimin' to git cattle an' take you

folks outa here," the young man said a little lamely. "The winter tied us up pretty bad down at Laramie, an' there was little to be done but wait. I'm with a big herd over west o' the hills now! There's grazin' land fer you! If pa had gone there first off he'd be as rich as a saint right now!"

Neither of the women answered him. He felt that his words had failed to impress, and a sudden and violent resentment grew in his mind. He felt that his father, by eternally grinding the very souls from these two, had deprived him of their confidence in any venture he might attempt.

His mother poured some buffalo stew into a bowl and urged him to the table. He drew the heavy chair close, and they all laughed as he took his old place at the table. Habit had gripped him; he felt again that he was at home. He wondered if his father had seen him come and feigned not to know that he was there.

"How's pa?" he asked, summoning all his courage for the direct question.

"He wintered right good," Jennie Mason answered. "Fer a spell he was ailin', I thought, but he said nothin', an' finally come better."

"I'm glad. Pa don't understand me," Jimmie lamented.

Once again his words were greeted by silence. He could see that both women had something on their minds; something that cried out for utterance, yet which they could not put into words. He felt sure that it had to do with his father. Perhaps, he thought, his father had forbidden him the right of return to the valley.

It was from Betty he caught a gleaming of the truth. Her wisdom was that of youth, her impetuosity the gateway to discovery:

"The last time the trapper come in we had a long talk—that is, as long as an Injun ever talks!" she said. "He comes in every month or so and trades buffalo meat and buckskin fer corn. He brings tobacco fer your pa, an' told him all about it, too. Your pa was mad, an' made us all pray!"

"What?" Jimmie cried, sensing that the tale the Indian had told had to do with himself and that the prayers were for him. "What did the fool redskin say?"

The mother, seeing that the unavoidable had come, drew close and took matters into her own hands.

"He told us about Hell Bend Mason," she said in strained voice; "he was right proud an' he boasted 'bout the shootin' you could do. He said even when firewater had 'most shut your eyes, you was a shooter!"

"He's a fool!" Jimmie cried, his eyes dropping and a sudden sense of shame enveloping him.

"He said you an' that feller Brant was pards and that all other men was afraid o' you an' give in to you!" Betty supplemented.

Jimmie made no direct answer, his mind groping for a way out. He knew what such words must have meant to his religious father and mother. For their son to be a cohort of the man they knew as a thief would be well nigh unbearable to them.

At that moment he would have given up his chance for success and committed himself eternally to the alkali valley could he thereby undo the few hours he had spent at Faro. He wondered if Betty knew that her own father was the founder of the criminal town.

"Your pa blamed ma fer lettin' you go," Betty said. "It was hard on her. The days was so long an' the winter so bad we couldn't git out at all. He talked about it most o' the time!"

Because he could see no other way around the damning facts, Jimmie resorted to anger.

"I was drove to it!" he cried. "I never done anythin' very bad. A man was comin' to kill me—"

"Over some other girl!" Betty cut in, her face pale as she said the terrible words.

"It's a lie!" Jimmie cried. "I don't even know her name! I seen her just once, Betty. That night in—in—in—the dance hall!" He had been on the point of saying her father's name and, even in his anger, was glad that he had not.

Betty pouted.

"You drank, Jimmie?" his mother queried.

"Yes. That one night, I drank."

"You gambled?"

"Yes."

There was a moment of silence; a long moment. Then Betty spoke again:

"You danced with that woman an' all the men looked on an' cheered, an' called you Hell Bend Mason?"

"Yes—Gawd a'mighty, yes! I did!" Jimmie dropped his face into the palms of his hands and the steam from the dish before him rose slowly and twined about his hair like tiny fog-strings that sought a place to fasten and cling.

"You kissed her!" Betty insisted, her manner that of a person voicing suspicions that she prays may be 'wrong.'

"No, Betty!" Jimmie said listlessly. "No, I never kissed her! I never done a thing but dance with the little fool! She's said things that ain't right. Cimarron Jones come after me next mornin' an' we had to shoot at each other. But it was all wrong; all awful wrong. There wasn't no need o' that thing!"

"Your pa won't believe it!" Betty challenged, but there was a new note in her voice; one of relief. Jimmie raised his eyes to hers, a look of utter helplessness in them.

"Brant'll swear I'm tellin' only the truth!" Jimmie told her.

"Who'd believe a thief?" the girl demanded.

"Betty—don't you believe what I say?—" the lad asked earnestly. "I wouldn't lie to you!"

For a second the girl looked at him. She saw the acute misery in his face and her anger melted under the fires of her love.

"I do believe you, Jimmie!" she said, at the same time taking his head in her arms. "I do. An' the others have got to!"

Jennie Mason managed to fuss with the bowl of stew and to press it nearer Jimmie that he might eat. She did not speak as the two lovers clung to each other. The expression on her face seemed to indicate an infinite satisfaction in the trust that had been reborn between the two and a constant worry over what must be faced when Mason returned to face his son.

The stew was nearly cold when Jimmie turned again toward the table. He ate half-heartedly. Over them all seemed to

hang the imminence of disaster. They were as children cowering before storm clouds that had suddenly risen to blot out the sunshine.

"You'd best tell your pa the whole story, just as it happened," Jennie Mason said.

As she spoke, Jimmie heard the same clanging that he had heard that day when he rode out of the valley. It seemed ironical. His father was exactly as he had left him; as cold as the very steel he struck, as adamant as the alkali of the valley, as unrelenting as the winter wind. The clanging seemed to the lad a chorus of failure and suddenly he wanted more than anything else a reconciliation with his father!

"He won't believe," he said slowly; "he can't think nothin' good o' me, ma!"

"You better tell him, anyhow."

"I will." Jimmie rose from the table with the words and walked slowly to the door that looked out over the valley. Down by the yellow stream he saw his father again. How familiar the garments the man wore! How identical with his memory were the huge, stooped shoulders, the broad back, the gestures of the great hands as the man worked. Jimmie felt that the man was deliberately keeping his face turned away after the manner of one whose mind is made up to resistance, but who seeks advantage in postponing the clash until his own good time. The lad turned to his mother.

"I'll tell him the truth if he wants to listen," he said steadily. "I'll do that fer you an' Betty. But I ain't goin' to try to make him listen—I ain't goin' to have him disbelievin' what I say more'n once!"

Jennie Mason walked toward him, rested her lumpy, toil-twisted fingers on his arms. To Jimmie she seemed to have attained a greater stature than ever before. He sensed a strange power in her as she spoke.

"My little baby!" she crooned to him. "Just my little baby—that's all you are, Jimmie. Growed up a mite, bigger, stronger, older—but my little baby jest the same! Every day you're growin' more an' more like yore pa!"

As he stood there, helpless in her grasp,

bound to inactivity by unbreakable fetters, the sound of Mason's footsteps came to them. The man was returning to the house.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ALKALI.

THEY stood together as he entered the door. Jennie Mason had again thrust herself between the two just as she had on that terrible occasion when Mason had struck her the blow intended for his son. It was a tableau of expectancy; a stilling of emotions that must rise instantly to meet whatever fate dictated.

In the flashing instant of his first direct glance at his father, Jimmie saw that the man had changed but little. His beard was a trifle more shaggy and here and there silver ran through it attesting the encroachment of the years. Perhaps the shoulders were a trifle more stooped, the odor of earth a little more noticeable.

The eyes of the man were still bright, still carried the steel-like glint he remembered and the jaw, dominant even through the whiskers that wreathed it, evidenced the same dogged obstinacy. It was clear to them all that Mason's surprise at finding Jimmie there was feigned. Jimmie rather felt that whatever his father did would be deliberate, the result of careful planning as he had worked down by the stream.

Mason stood a moment in the door. Then, with the air of one who tolerates infinite persecution at the hands of the unworthy, he walked ponderously to the table and drew his heavy chair close. While the others stood very still, he lifted his pipe, knocked the dottle from it on the hearthstone, and kicked the burned tobacco into the embers.

"He better be comin' in soon, ma," he said casually. "I'm near out o' smokin'."

Farcial as it was, pretense as the entire affair showed itself to be, it was, nevertheless, a masterly manner of thrusting the burden onto the opposing forces. Mason's actions placed the brunt of the meeting on Jimmie and his mother and Betty. Sensing this, Jimmie rose to the occasion.

"Hello, pa," he said evenly, "I reckon you didn't see me."

The words fell upon silence and were answered by silence. Mason stuffed some of the tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, pressing it home carefully and with overdone fastidiousness. Then he poked among the flames and found a stick which he held over the bowl. Shortly, his face was wreathed in smoke clouds. Then he dropped into his chair.

"I got hungry a little early, ma," he mumbled. "Could you be fixin' a snack?"

"Ain't you goin' to speak to your own son?" Jennie Mason asked.

Taking particular care that none of his words might be construed as being directed at Jimmie, Mason answered:

"My son? Your son? We bred a thief, a killer, a drinker, a gambler, an' a woman hunter—"

"Pa," Jimmie snapped, his face gone white at the open charge, "yo're lyin' like an Injun with a forked tongue!"

Mason leaped to his feet, white anger gleaming from his eyes.

"Out o' this house!" he bellowed, once again raising a trembling finger and pointing toward the placid valley. "Out! You ain't fit to touch the hand o' any one that's here! You ain't no son o' mine!"

Jimmie recoiled at the words, an enormous disappointment tempering the flash of anger he showed. For a fleeting second he seemed at a loss as to what to do, then he seized his hat and started away. Jennie Mason caught his arm holding him tight as she turned to face her husband.

"Jim," she said, and once again they caught that indescribable something about her that was power. It seemed actually to increase her stature. "Jim—he ain't goin' like that! Mebbe he ain't your son—he is mine! He's my boy. I love him. There never was a time he needed me more."

"You won't never learn!" Mason shouted. "You said that afore. Some folks is born with the light o' hell gleamin' in their eyes; he's like that! Some folks is cast out by God 'cause o' the hell that boils in their hearts—he's one o' them!"

"You told me once afore you'd go—you'd leave me fer him—this time, God help you—go! Go with him!"

Betty cried out in alarm. Jimmie slipped

his arm about his mother's waist and urged her toward the door. Jennie Mason resisted, stood quite calm, her eyes so steadily gazing into those of her husband that his found themselves unable to stand the strain and dropped, though his trembling hand still pointed toward the door and his belligerent manner persisted.

"Pa," she said softly. "Pa, look up at me!"

Mason's shoulders writhed as though they were being lashed by a whip, but his eyes did not meet those of the little woman suddenly grown big. He sensed the presence of her power even as Betty and Jimmy were awed by it; silenced by it.

"Look up at me, pa," she repeated slowly. Mason might have been a fractious child from the tone she used. But he did not look up. The doggedness of him held him fast.

And there came to them the sound of hoofbeats in the valley. Hoofbeats that were thunderous as are those of an animal being pressed for all the speed that it can offer. So unusual a sound was certain to take their minds from even this drama of finality. Mason raised his eyes toward the door. Jimmie swung about, and Betty drew nearer to him. Jennie Mason showed no change, her eyes still clinging to her husband's flushed face.

Suddenly the horse came to a sliding stop before the door, and a man lunged from the saddle and dashed into the house. In his hands he carried a rock. He seemed oblivious of them as separate entities. He came into the room on the run, his boots clattering on the worn floor, his eyes fastened to the rock he carried.

"Brant!" Jimmie Mason cried in surprise.

"Gold!" Brant babbled almost incoherently. "My Gawd, Jimmie, gold! Tons o' it! Tons o' it! Gold! Real gold! Gawd alive, man, we've struck it rich! Right here in the valley—up there where I was waitin' for yuh to come back! Gold—gold—"

He dropped the rock onto the table and laughed almost in hysteria. Jimmie Mason went to the table and examined the specimen Brant had brought in. He knew little

enough about gold, but there could be no doubting its presence in that fragment of strata. Grant had been a prospector, he knew.

"Gold, ma!" Jimmie said solemnly. "Gold right here in the valley where we thought there wasn't nothin' but alkali!"

At the very incongruity of the thing he threw back his head and laughed, the tones carrying much the same note as those which had characterized the laugh of Brant; a note of mild hysteria; a note that has rung out on the mountain fastness a thousand times as some prospector, alone in the hills, has stumbled upon the end of the great quest, and fingers the fortune for which he gave his all.

Betty raised the rock and gazed upon it in fascination. Still Jennie Mason stood quiet. But the appearance of Brant had served to rouse in Mason all the hatred of which he was capable. He towered above the man now:

"You fiend o' hell!" he screamed. "You come here to this place! You! First you show yourself a thief; then you teach this young fool to drink an' gamble an' shoot —then you show your face here among decent people?

"You come to rob us—that's what you done! You was hidin' out in the hills to make a robber o' my own son! You!—God help me. Git out! Git out afore I lay hands on ye an' break your dirty bones into powder—"

Mason had lost all control. He seized the rock and raised it in his mighty fist as though to dash Brant's head to a pulp. Jennie Mason again faced him, reached up and caught his elbow, and took the stone from him. She laid it on the table and pressed her husband toward his chair. Once again, as he had years before when the second herd died off, Mason became as clay in her hands. His emotions undermined his courage.

"Set down, Mr. Brant," Jennie Mason said. "Ever'body set down an' listen to me. I've waited many a long, weary year for this hour. Now I'll be havin' my say:

"First off, pa, you ain't yourself. You're talkin' foolish! Alkali has killed yore reason plenty!"

"Damn gold!" Mason mumbled from his chair. "Miles offered that!"

"You'll be listenin'," Jennie Mason ordered, and the man quieted. After a moment she went on:

"Alkali ruined the valley all 'cept enough land to live off'n. Pa's fought the greatest fight I ever know a man to fight, but he was blinded to sense 'cause he had so much courage!

"I feel that way 'bout things. Weaknesses never hurts a man half so much as strengths! It was pa's strength that kept us all here—his courage! If he'd been weaker he'd have quit an' we'd have got out an' mebbe found a better place. It wasn't only alkali in the valley—it was alkali in pa!

"The same way with Jimmie. He run away from the alkali in the valley an' he found alkali in himself just like pa's. It took the turn o' drink an' gun-shootin'—but it's alkali just the same. Jimmie beat his alkali 'cause he had the love o' Betty to help him!

"Now comes Brant. Brant had alkali when he tried to steal. I reckon you ain't never had much love in yore life, Mr. Brant! You let the alkali run wild in you, an' it made you try to steal!"

She looked at Brant a moment, and the man nodded dumbly. There was real mystery in his eyes. He mumbled something about trying to make up for the time he had attempted to rob them. Jennie Mason went on:

"Now, pa," she said, "you gotta think a mite straighter. If Brant an' Jimmie had come here to rob us, would Brant have come arunnin' in here to show us when he found gold? O' course not! He'd have hid it an' dug it out an' lugged it off, an' you'd never have knowed it!"

"Know what I'm gettin' at, pa? Brant likes Jimmie! He's got somethin' in his heart that's stronger'n alkali now! It's love—love o' a friend! That'll make Brant a fine man!"

"By Gawd, it will!" Brant avowed earnestly. "I never even thought o' hidin' the gold. I was only thinkin' how glad Jimmie'd be 'cause he could take yuh all out'n the valley!"

Jennie Mason laughed softly.

"See, pa? Love is greater'n courage; it makes courage. You fought a good fight an' all the time God had placed the thing here that you needed most! Gold! Yes, we need gold. We need it to tear up here an' git back into the world. To git back where Betty an' Jimmie can marry an' where we'll have a home an' mebbe there'll be a new Jimmie to love an' to teach all the things we taught our own Jimmie.

"It's Jimmie's turn to fight now. It's his right to fight an' our right to help him. We'll dig this gold an' then Brant an' Jimmie'll git into the cattle business off over the hills where there ain't salt alkali. You an' me'll rest, pa.

"I want to rest. I'm about done in, pa. We ain't had time fer the love that's our'n. I want to love you; want to make you let go the alkali that's had you so's we can sit together an' look back an' see that all the time, even in our mistakes, it was love that kept us goin'—not just strength an' courage an' brawn."

As she spoke, Jennie Mason rose to vast heights. The others gazed upon her as they might have upon a direct heavenly manifestation. Her face seemed transfigured by the revelations she made. Her stooped and worn figure seemed to have assumed a new life, a new power that gripped them and held them and shamed them.

"Pa," she said then, "do you love me?"

"Yes, yes," Mason said hoarsely, "I love you, Jennie!"

"More'n the valley, pa?" the woman insisted.

"More'n the valley," he said in tones of a school child answering a simple question, then, on his own volition, "more'n everythin' else on earth, Jennie! All I been workin' fer is to make a place fer you!"

"I knew it," she said happily, "all the time, I knew it! That's why I was happy. I guess it paid, pa. Alkali is everywhere fer everybody—we kin be thankful we found our'n!"

Then she turned to Jimmie.

"Your pa an' me ain't goin' to work no more, Jimmie," she said evenly. "We're worked out. You an' Brant go git this gold. See what there is to it an' how much

Dig all you can carry, then ride to town an' change it into money. Buy a wagon that'll take the rest o' us in.

"When you come back, we'll mine what gold there is, then we'll buy cattle an' find a new place an' if I knows a single thing about each o' us—that new place 'll be heaven!"

She waved Jimmie and Brant from the room with a significant gesture. Silently they left, mounted their horses and Brant led the way toward the hills. They had ridden but a short distance when the man spoke.

"Jimmie, life is queer—damn queer!" he muttered. "Ain't it funny that jest 'cause yore father paid me arter I tried to rob him—I —should meet up with you an' pull a gun against Gambel jest to see Mason's son git a square deal? Look at all what come of it!"

"I know it," Jimmie said, "queer—even queerer'n queer!"

"Yore mother is an angel!" Brant said. "I bet I won't ever do her a wrong deal! Her or anybody else!"

It was nearing dark when they returned to the valley. Jimmie had seen for himself that the gold strike was genuine; that fate had finally intervened to lead them from the valley. A vast sense of freedom gripped him. He was infinitely thankful to God for that which had been given them. In that mood he slipped from the saddle at the door and cast hopeful eyes about for his father.

He stepped into the room and at first thought the place was empty. However, a second glance showed him that his father was seated before the fire in the great log chair. Jimmie stopped short and the man rose. They gazed steadily into each other's eyes for several seconds, then Mason smiled; a different smile than Jimmie had ever seen upon his father's face.

"Jimmie, lad," Mason said as he held forth his hand in greeting, "men are made to work—women are made to run the world and kinda represent God on earth!"

Jimmie seized his father's hand eagerly, a glad cry crossing his lips. Before either realized it, they were in each other's arms. They remained thus when Jennie Mason

entered the room and stood looking at them. Jimmie saw that her lips quivered, her hands trembled. In battle, she had been supreme. In victory, she was a woman.

She dropped into a chair, laid her weary head upon the table and sobbed unrestrainedly. They both went to her, comforted her. Suddenly Mason dropped to his knees beside her and prayed fervently. Jimmie saw his mother's hand reach forth and draw the great head nearer her. Something vast within him asserted itself; something which impelled him to kneel beside the table and bow his head as the father thanked God.

Many, many times his father spoke of alkali; of various kinds of alkali and thanked God for the manner of the disclosures. After a long time Mason stopped and rose slowly to his feet. Jennie Mason had calmed and she rose with him, a light of happiness and peace in her eyes. Jimmie, too, rose. Over by the fireplace they all saw Brant on his knees, his head bowed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DOUBLE M.

THE house was of adobe. It stood beside a river that flowed gently through the prairie lands and watered the luxuriant bunch grass. A clump of cottonwoods grew at the western side of the building and offered considerable shade on the long porch during the heat of the afternoons.

Over the door to the big house there reposed a burned-in sign reading *Double M*. The outhouses carried the same emblem and, to one who might have had the power to count the herds grazing over the prairies, some several thousand steers and no less than fifty wiry ponies carried the same emblem on their flank.

Down by the river bank, there was an arroyo which was well filled with small brambles and underbrush and from here hundreds of birds sang during the day and at night there came the brooding of the 'poorwills or the silvery song of the thrasher when the moon shone bright. About a mile away there was a stout woodland, and

in the quiet recesses of this lurked the black tail deer.

The gobble of wild turkeys, the bark of prairie dogs, the shrill cawing of crows rasped across the melodies of the song birds during the long, peaceful days. Cowboys, men who loved the open and whose faces carried the brand of the plains as clearly as the flanks of animals carried the brand of the ranch, talked drawlingly of herds, of drives, of round-ups.

On the long porch in the shade of the cottonwoods sat two men. One was James Mason and he sat contentedly puffing a black pipe and gazing off over the plains. The other was Tom Miles. Mason shifted his position in the canvas chair and spat voluminously over the porch and into the dust.

"Tom," he said easily, "this here association is goin' to grow into a right important affair—if you ask me."

"It's needed, Jim," Miles replied. "The vigilantes ain't what they're cracked up tuh be! They gather together fer the express purpose o' stretchin' a neck. It don't matter a hell o' a heap whose neck it is, nuther!"

"That's just it!" Mason agreed. "The hangin' o' that feller Meggs was a derned outrage! He hadn't run off no cattle! They're whispering now 'bout it bein' due to a feud between him an' one o' the leaders o' the vigilantes!"

"Jimmie's doin' the right thing," Miles nodded firmly. "This gittin' the bigger ranchers together is plumb helpful. Ruslin' is on its last laigs, Jim!"

"We lost a thousan' head, I bet," Mason said, seemingly little perturbed over the fact.

"All told, I reckon," Miles agreed readily. "But that ain't goin' to bother us none if we stop 'em from further drivin' off. We're runnin' close to five thousan' head now an' Jimmie says he's goin' to bring in that new breed this fall."

"Ralston says we're goin' to pass him in two years!" Mason laughed. "He says Jimmie's a natural born business head an' Brant is the best all 'round cattle man he ever seen."

They talked thus until Jennie Mason ap-

peared at the door and walked toward them. With the toe of his boot, Mason kicked a chair around for her and the woman sat down.

"You're sure gainin', Jen," Mason smiled in satisfaction. "This here place agrees with you plumb plenty."

Jennie Mason had gained. The haggard look was gone from her eyes, her face had filled out, and she had gained in weight. She smiled a little and sank into a chair.

"You bet it agrees with me, pa," she said. "Why wouldn't it?" She waved a hand in a gesture which included the far-flung plains about them and, in the eastern distance, the range of hills which reared upward as a constant reminder of the gift it had made them.

Far across the stream a herd moved slowly through the grass. Overhead an eagle soared, its sharp eyes watching alertly the signs of life that came from the prairie dog village. An ineffable contentment seemed in the very air. Jennie Mason spoke again:

"I never was so happy. There's only one thing I feel cheated about, pa."

"What's that?" Mason demanded. "Better tell Jimmie 'bout it, ma. He'd go git it an' bring it to your feet, if it was one o' them mountains!"

"It ain't," Jennie Mason laughed. "It's a black pipe that I could smoke like you do that one. I never see a man git so much comfort as you do outa that pipe an' chair, pa!"

"Here," said Mason readily, extending the pipe toward his wife, "take 'er as a gift from me, Jen—derned if I'll be stingy!"

Jennie Mason withdrew in mock horror, her fingers gripping her nostrils as though the odor of the black pipe were too much for human endurance. Both men laughed heartily, and Mason slipped the pipe onto the porch and drew his wife close to him.

"Better learn to chaw, Jennie," Miles suggested as he spat into the dust.

"Ugh!" the woman shuddered. "That is the only thing I hold ag'in' you, Tom Miles!"

"The only 'alkali' I got left in me, eh, Jennie?" the man laughed easily. "Well,

can't be real alkali, 'caused I farned tuh do it arter them road agents held up my gamblin' place an' burned out thuh town o' Faro."

"No man ain't ever goin' through thuh pearly gates with a chaw in his mouth, Tom," Mason preached in mock severity.

"He ain't even goin' to git his foot on the first step if he's got the smell o' that pipe on him!" Jennie Mason challenged.

Once again both men laughed loudly, Mason sitting erect in his chair during the process and stamping his boot on the floor to emphasize his appreciation.

Then through the door came another woman. It was Betty, and her pretty face was wrinkled where a very genuine wrath sat upon her brow.

"You folks has got to keep quiet or git out of here!" she snapped. "Little Jimmie's sound asleep, an' he don't git any too much rest this hot weather."

At her command the men lapsed into instantaneous silence. For a moment she stood before them, a picture of combined indignation and outraged accusation. Then she said: "You'd oughta know better."

The expressions on their faces served to disclose the fact that they agreed with her. They really should have known better, because the baby had gone to sleep late and only after quite a struggle. Miles was first to speak.

"We kinda forgot, Betty," he said; "but we'll be right careful now." He held out his hand, and the girl went to him and sat on his knee.

"I hate this cattle association thing," she said petulantly. "It makes Jim ride into town too often. He oughta be gittin' back by this time o' day."

"Oh-ho!" Mason grinned. "That's what is makin' my little gal feel outa sorts, huh? She can't wait till her husban' gits back home. Well—that's fine, Betty! I reckon we'll just have to stand you till Jimmie gits back. After that you'll be yourself agin'."

Even Betty smiled at the truth of the assertion. A vagrant breeze swept across the porch and blew a lock of her hair into her eyes. She reached upward to brush it out, and her father caught her hand and carried it to his lips, where he held it.

"Little gal," he said affectionately, "Jimmie Mason's got the finest wife on earth!"

"Right!" Mason agreed, touching his own wife's hand as she spoke. "If the little shaver asleep in there kin do half as good as both his father an' grandfather done—he'll be some hellin' fine judge o' wimmen folk!"

But Betty Mason had caught sight of something far out over the plains. She rose abruptly from her father's knee and shaded her eyes to look more closely.

"Somebody's comin'," she said hopefully.

They watched for a time, then Mason spoke up.

"It's Brant an' Jimmie," he said. "I'd know the gait o' them hosses at forty miles."

Miles, now that his daughter had turned away, touched Mason's arms and indicated her with a wink. Already the girl was changing from the slightly petulant mood that had gripped her during the absence of her husband. She waved her hand in greeting, though it must have been evident that the riders were too far away to see the move. Then she stepped out into the sun and walked toward the corral, where they would stop to leave their horses.

She met them there—Jimmie Mason and Brant. Brant caught Jimmie's reins as the younger man neglected them in embracing his wife.

"How's sonny?" he asked, when he had kissed her several times.

"Fine!" Betty laughed in delight. "He missed you, though!" Then she noticed that Jimmie's horse was foam-flecked and a light of pleasure beamed in her eyes.

"You been ridin' hard, Jim?" she asked archly.

"Uh-huh! Hot, too. But we hustled right along."

"What for?"

He threw his arm about her and hugged her until she pulled away with a gasp.

"You hurt me, Jim," she complained happily.

"That's what I hustled up to do," he said.

"Hurt me?"

"Yeah—I love to hurt you!"

"Git in thar, yuh damned cayuse!" Brant bellowed at one of the horses. "Yo're nutty 'nuff now without hearin' any more o' this talk!"

The younger people laughed and walked toward the house with their arms about each other.

The three on the porch rose and met them. Mason asked some questions:

"Did they git formed, Jimmie?"

"Yeah. They org'nized an' elected officers an' made rules. It'll be a fine thing, pa. The cattle buyers in the East are goin' to help along by buyin' from the association, an' that'll stop rustlers a heap, 'cause the brands'll be watched closer an' the ranchers a heap better known."

Brant came to the porch. Mason and Miles shook his hand warmly.

"Don't talk too loud now," Betty Mason warned again. "Little Jimmie's asleep."

Miles shrugged helplessly, winked at Mason. Brant spoke.

"He told yuh they got org'nized?" he asked.

"Yep. It sounds like a good thing," the elder Mason said.

"Did he tell yuh who's thuh pres'dent?"

"Nope."

"That'll be thuh weak spot," Brant said slowly.

"Why?" Miles demanded. "Who did thuh fools elect?"

"Him," Brant grinned laconically, at the same time pointing at Jimmie Mason.

For a second there was silence, during which Jimmie flushed a little happily. Betty straightened at his side, her posture showing vast pride. She seemed to forget her maledictions against the association of a few minutes before.

"They showed right good sense," she said frankly. "My husban' is the smartest man out here."

"It looks like the alkali has been washed out o' life complete!" Jennie Mason said earnestly. "I'm right happy."

"Well, by Gawd!" Miles roared. "Little Jimmie Mason pres'dent o' thuh whole association!"

"Pa!" Betty snapped. "Shush! Little Jimmie's asleep?"

Deliberately she led her husband into the house to see the baby, and with a sad shake of the head Miles dropped back into his chair.

Jennie Mason hesitated for a single moment, then went in after them. Her very attitude showed that she felt heavily the responsibility of the little one; it seemed that she was sure none was qualified to watch over it as she was.

Brant spoke: "We'll bring in that new breed in a week. Jimmie bought 'em today."

"They're all alike," Miles muttered. "Jim, yuh can't git away from it. I've allus told yuh that!"

"What—breeds?" Brant asked.

"No, yuh lop-eared burro!" Tom Miles snarled under his breath. "Women! They

are all alike, an' a wise man has tuh make allowances fer 'em."

"Sure!" Mason agreed imperturbably. "Sure thing!" He settled back into his chair once more and groped for his black pipe. "That's the wisest thing you ever said, Tom."

"What?" Brant asked.

"Why, you lop-eared burro," Mason taunted, "that what he just said about women. You gotta make allowances fer 'em. Only a jackass don't!"

As he spoke Mason ran the fingers of one great hand in a ruminative gesture over his square, outthrust chin. The move served to accentuate the fighting qualities of the man's face, which now were more clearly to be seen because of the complete absence of the shaggy beard.

THE END



ALL THE YEAR ROUND FOR HIM!

ROMANCE rides in the spring time,
And in summer, so they say,
Us cowboys have it easy
Takin' horseback rides for pay!

Dudes like the range in autumn
When blue haze is on the hills,
(If they had to work the roundup
Maybe so they'd miss its thrills!)

And so the range has seasons
When all sorts of folks can ride,
And play at punchin' cattle,
Though when winter comes they hide.

But when woeful winds come keenin'
And the blizzard's on the wing
You'll find *cowpunchers* ridin',
Same as summertime or spring.

Because though rangeland winter
Comes to bluster and to freeze,
No cowboy is a quitter
With a horse between his knees!

S. Omer Barker.



In the Saddle of Bronco King

By GARRET SMITH

DAN KING came slowly out of the door of the old ranch house and paused irresolutely on the broad veranda. Trouble haunted the depths of his dreamy blue eyes. It corrugated his lean, handsome young face.

Down the long slope his gaze swept over the remaining acres of the King ranch till it rested finally on the little town in the valley—King City—to which his masterful father had given his name.

Dan sighed. A slight shudder, almost a tremor of fear, passed over his stalwart frame.

He shook himself angrily and started down the path toward the corral!

"It's about time I lay off dreamin' and did a little fightin'," he told himself. "Dad wouldn't give in to it if he was alive."

A moment he leaned against the corral gate and looked back at the old rambling gray house where he was born. The wistful dreaminess returned to his eyes.

Old Dan King, his father, had wrought better than he knew when he built that house fifty years before. There had been a touch of the dreamer in old Dan, too, down under his vigorous, practical exterior. His home reflected it. Its lines were those of the graceful old New England farm-houses of Colonial days.

Again Dan pulled himself together. It became apparent that he had a resolute chin. There was a glint of steel in the blue eyes now.

"Can't let the old place go!" he gritted. "They ain't got me hog-tied yet, not a-tall."

He swung open the corral gate and whistled shrilly through his fingers.

"Hey, Pinto," he called.

His favorite paint-pony lifted his head and whinnied, then broke loose from the bunch of his fellows and cantered toward his master.

Dan led the pony to the barn by the fore-

lock, rubbed him down until his coat shone, then saddled and bridled him.

As young King flung his six feet of brawn into the saddle the seemingly gentle pony suddenly went into action, as though he had stepped on a high voltage live wire.

Down the trail he thundered, heels flying high, his master sitting the plunging saddle with the easy abandon of one to whom riding was more natural than walking.

"Go it, you little devil!" he shouted. "We'll ride right into his danged old ice-house of a bank on all fours an' give him a dose of six-gun if we have to."

But as Dan entered the streets of the town his grimly-held resolution flagged a little. He choked the pony down to a reluctant canter, and plopped through the deep alkali dust of the unpaved streets in deep perplexity.

"Wish to thunder I knew just what the old coot wants to see me about!" he grumbled. "What the devil will I say if—"

He left the dreaded end of the sentence unfinished.

In front of a two-story building with an imposing false front he stopped and slowly dismounted. He tied Pinto to the hitching rail that lined the board sidewalk. Then he eyed the name over the entrance as though he had never seen it before.

"King City National Bank," it read.

As a matter of fact he had seen that name all too often since the death of his widowed mother had left him to handle the dwindling affairs of the King ranch.

He took a slow step toward the bank entrance, then paused, and thoughtfully drew the makings from his pocket and rolled a cigarette.

He was still puffing at the glowing butt and abstractedly stroking the sympathetic nose of Pinto when a big touring car drove up. Dan recognized the driver as Pete Gofert, handy man at Ferguson's dude-ranch across the valley. This was one of the cars Ferguson kept for transporting guests who did not take kindly to the native saddle.

One of those unpopular outlanders was alighting from the rear seat now.

Dan King gave an oblique glance at a

large mottled face set with a pair of cold, arrogant eyes. He decided in the instant he couldn't care for this person.

Seeing no encouragement in the man's face he withheld the usual greeting accorded strangers in that country, and with a casual "Howdy, Pete" to the driver, turned his attention elsewhere.

Then he realized that the big Easterner had lowered himself to the dusty sidewalk and was addressing him.

"My good fellow," the man mumbled pompously, "that's no place to leave your horse. How do you think a car can get up here? You'll be responsible if he damages this machine."

Dan let his gaze wander slowly and coolly back to the mottled face for an instant, then looked calmly past one purple ear as if he had glanced at some inanimate feature of the landscape and found it uninteresting. He neither spoke nor changed expression.

The big man glared, grunted, and strutted up the steps of the bank.

"And I thought they claimed the Czar o' Roosea'd been murdered a whole lot. Where'd ye dig him up?" Dan drawled.

"He's stoppin' over to the ranch and bein' hated most exclusive. Name's Thomas, rich as all git out, an' father of that young squirt that's got himself engaged to ol' Mosier's daughter."

Dan King started as if stung and turned brick red, then pale. He looked away quickly, and for a full minute seemed to be interested in objects elsewhere.

When he turned back to Pete Gofert his face was composed again.

"Did you say Sally Mosier was engaged to that Eastern dude?"

"Yeah. 'Spouse you'd heard. He let on about it all over the place last week. Celebrated with his little drinkin' pals that evenin', an' the boss raised hell about it next day. Ye know how sot Ferguson is against any red-eye around the ranch."

"Well, it seemed he wired the glad news to his dad, an' ol' Thomas hot-footed out here, an' when he saw Sally an' took a squint at ol' Seth's collaterals an' appurtenances, he give 'em his blessin' an' aims to set the boy up out here an' make a man

of him. Believe me, if he can make a man o' that young bunch o' low-grade shirt-stuffin, he's some trick manufacturer."

Inside the bank at this moment, C. K. Thomas was being admitted to the inner office of Seth Mosier, president of the bank, and prospective father-in-law of the junior Thomas.

Seth Mosier unlimbered his lanky form from the only real mahogany swivel-chair in King City, and shook hands with non-committal solemnity. His leathery face as usual bore no expression, except for his elusive gray eyes.

Those eyes had a trick of hinting at several expressions at once. There was penetrating shrewdness—no doubt about that. But back of it was something that might be kindly humor and might be sardonic malice—no man was ever quite sure which. And at times those eyes could look as guileless as a baby's.

Seth Mosier would have been a poker player par excellence had he not been too conservative for indulgence in games of chance.

"Shorely pleased to meet you," he admitted, as his caller eased his girth into the proffered chair.

"Mutual, I assure you," mumbled Thomas. "We're more or less acquainted already, I take it. You know all about me. I've looked you up pretty thoroughly. My letter made my position pretty clear. Won't deny I was uneasy when the boy wired me he was engaged. But since I met your little girl I will say he has shown some sense at last."

"Mmm," intoned Seth Mosier, non-committally.

"Now this King place I telephoned about. The boy says your girl admires it a lot and he wants to buy it. Seems to think he'd like to settle in this country. I think it might be just the thing to make a he-man of him. Did you arrange to have young King here?"

Instead of replying at once, Seth Mosier eyed his caller speculatively for a moment.

"So," he commented at last. "You sort of aim to have your boy ride in the saddle of Bronco King! Yes. Young King should be here any minute."

"Bronco King?" Thomas asked. "Is that what you call him?"

Again the banker did not reply immediately. There was a faraway look in his enigmatic gray eyes. Presently he roused himself.

"Call who?" he asked. "Young King? No. I'm sorry to say, no. Oh, the boy's a nice boy, popular, clean. But he isn't Bronco King—sort of a dreamer, easy-goin' sort. I'm afraid he'll never ride in the saddle of Bronco King.

"No. Bronco King was old Daniel B. King, Sr., father of young Daniel B., the boy we're expecting. There was a he-man for you! He was a real king!"

"They gave him the title of Bronco King because he was the biggest raiser of broncos in this part of the West. He was born an' brought up just over the border in Montana and came here as bronc-buster on old man Hansett's ranch when he was turnin' twenty-one. I struck the West at the same time, sent here for my health from Connecticut where I was brought up, and got a job as mess-steward and bookkeeper for old Hansett. Bronco and I got to be pals, more because we were so different than anything else.

"Bronco was an easy spender at first and I was a tightwad. I got him to begin saving, took care of his wages for him. I reckon that's what started me to bein' a banker.

"By the time I went over to Wind City to work in a real bank, he had money enough saved to buy a few bronc and set up ranchin' by himself. He grew fast. Ten years later he owned all the land in sight around here and had started King City. Then I took my savings and came here. With his help, I started this bank.

"Bronco King died when his boy, Daniel B., Jr., was a baby. Well, you know how it is. His widow did the best she could. But times ain't what they used to be around here in the horse and cattle raisin' business. She had to let go of the ranch a little at a time. All there is left now is the old ranch house, and the land between the city limits and there.

"But folks around here ain't forgot Bronco King. They been hopin' the young

man would fill his saddle. But he don't somehow seem to measure up."

"But what's the price of the property? That's what I want to know," demanded Thomas impatiently.

"I've been telling you all of this, Mr. Thomas," Seth continued unperturbed, "because I want you to understand it takes a real man to ride in the saddle of Bronco King. Maybe your boy can. I hope so, if he's going to marry my little girl. But now, I don't usually talk so much. The points is, I want to see Bronco King's son get a square deal if you aim to buy him out."

"I shall advise young King to take not a cent less than fifty thousand dollars for his property. If you don't want to go that high there ain't any use in talkin' about buyin'."

"Money's no object when I get what I want," Thomas asserted pompously. "Of course, I don't propose to be swindled. I shall get an impartial appraisal before I make a definite offer. I'll limit my talk with young King to-day to feeling him out on what he wants for the property."

"You'll find young Dan kinda obstinate," the banker warned him. "He takes after his dad in that."

"I'm not worried on that score. I understand he's in a rather tight place," Thomas asserted. "I tell you, Mr. Mosier, money talks. Every man has his price. Of course, this boy has his. Now, what about it? Better see if young King has come in yet. I'm in rather of a hurry to get this off my mind."

"I'll see," the banker acquiesced amiably, pressing the newly installed call-button under the edge of his desk.

A young woman appeared.

"See if Mr. Daniel King is out there," he directed. "If he is, show him in."

A moment later the bank's messenger and general factotem, Joe Hall, thrust his bullet-head out of the front door and hailed Dan.

"Hey, Dan. The boss wants to see you."

Dan King turned away from Pete with a resigned shrug, slowly entered the bank and went on into the president's office.

On the threshold he was stopped short by the sight of the objectionable Easterner

who had so affronted him a few minutes before.

"Excuse me," he said, backing out.

"It's all right, Dan," Mosier assured him. "Come in. I want you to meet Mr. C. K. Thomas from New York."

Thomas evidently recognized the young man who had so pointedly ignored his strictures on the ethics of pony-hitching, for his mottled face flushed a deeper purple. But he controlled himself and extended a hand which Dan King found surprisingly firm under the almost womanish texture of its well-kept surface.

"How do you do, sir," Thomas greeted him and spared Dan the necessity of a return greeting by plunging on into the object of his visit.

"Mr. King," he went on smoothly, "I'm thinking of taking some ranch land somewhere in the State. I've looked over several pieces of property, among them yours. I asked Mr. Mosier to get you to meet me here so I could get a line on what kind of a price you'd take for your place, in case I should definitely consider buying it."

Dan King was frankly surprised. Ever since getting Mosier's telephoned request to call at the bank, he had been speculating over every possible trouble that might befall his estate.

There was a mortgage subject to foreclosure at any interest date. He thought the banker might want to warn him that he would foreclose in the fall or that several long overdue notes must be met.

Any of these ultimata would mean losing his birthplace unless he could dissuade Mosier.

He studied the banker's inscrutable face now, suspecting that this tentative offer to buy might cloak Mosier's determination to foreclose. But Dan King did not hesitate.

"I'm shore obliged to you for likin' my property," he said, "but it ain't for sale."

"Not for sale! Oh, come now!" rumbled the big man. "Anything's for sale if the price is right. I often say I'll sell anything I've got but my wife."

"Mr. Thomas," Dan replied levelly, "there's some people that wouldn't any more think of selling their homes than they would of selling their wives. Not that I've

got a wife a-tall, but I nacherly feel that way about my home. It ain't for sale at any price."

There was no hint of irresolution in Dan's voice. Thomas could see that. He gave Mosier a meaning glance.

"Oh, very well," he acquiesced with amiability, that had a hollow sound to Dan. "If that's how you feel, that's that. There are other good places. I'll be around for a couple of days, Mr. King, so if you change your mind and want to make me an offer, it might not be too late to consider it."

He talked along for some time, about various ranch properties, including Dan in the conversation with evident purpose.

Dan seeing the Easterner bent on out-staying him, gave up finally and excused himself. But he hung about the corner waiting for Thomas to depart so he could have a word with the banker.

"Let me ask, Mr. Mosier," said Thomas after Dan had left, "that you say nothing to your daughter at present about my purchase of the King place; my son wishes to surprise her."

"Nobody'd ever notice you'd bought it," the banker remarked dryly, with as near to a grin as he ever indulged in.

"Just as good as bought—just as good as bought. See you later," and Thomas stalked on his pompous way.

"What's it all about, Mr. Mosier?" Dan asked dropping in again a little later. "You ain't advisin' me to sell out the old place, are you?"

"Wal, not exactly, Dan. But I wouldn't go so far's to tell ye not to consider it. You know as well as I do that critter raisin' in this section is on the down grade. The range is gone. The dirt farmers are takin' up all the fertile valley land. You can't carry a big enough bunch of horses on the land you've got left to make it profitable. It's too dry for dirt-farming."

"I've been sizing up the bunch you've got this year and I don't see how you're going to make enough to carry expenses and interest and reduce those notes any. I can't carry your notes and mortgage much longer with a property that is declining in value as collateral."

"You mean you'd close me out?"

"I wouldn't want to, Dan, but I might have to. If Thomas offers you fifty thousand it's the best offer you'll ever get. On a forced sale, you'd hardly realize enough to cover the notes and mortgage."

"Another thing, Dan, while I'm about it. I'd feel a lot better about extendin' credit if you 'tended to business better. It ain't any kindness to you to keep carryin' you along an' gettin' you deeper an' deeper in as long's you don't seem to do anything about it. They tell me if you'd do your own superintendin' like your dad did before ye when he was startin' and spent less time huntin' and fishin' and ridin' around in the hills, you might get somewhere. Brace up, boy."

Dan King listened to this homily quietly, a slight flush mantling his face.

"You mean well, Mr. Mosier," he commented when the older man had finished. "I shore appreciate your carryin' my debts along thisaway. But ye see a man's got to go his own way. I reckon the hombres that have been reportin' my goin's and comin's don't quite understand my business as well as I do."

Dan stalked out, followed by the sardonic gaze of Seth Mosier.

As the young man came down the steps of the bank, he suddenly stopped short and looked around as if seeking a place for flight. A young couple had just ridden up and were dismounting from their ponies in front of the building.

It was too late for Dan to escape however. The girl had caught sight of him. She, too, appeared a little startled. A slightly heightened color tinted her pretty, oval face. Her smile was a little forced and her greeting a bit over easy.

"Good morning, Dan. I want you to meet Mr. Thomas, my—my fiancé. This is Mr. Daniel King, Kendall."

Kendall Thomas was taller than his father and had an ease of manner that his self-made elder lacked. His bronzed features were regular and pleasant enough with a suggestion of unused intelligence.

But Dan King was filled with a sudden, almost insane desire to smash the well-shaped nose with his fist.

"Delighted, I'm sure," the soft voice of young Thomas was intoning perfunctory.

"I—I congratulate you," Dan heard himself saying as from a great distance.

Then his gaze swung to the girl again. For a long moment their eyes caught and held. The tint of her face deepened to a rosy red that matched the flush on Dan's bronzed countenance.

She broke away first, with a little flutter of pent-up breath.

"We're going in to see father. Isn't it a lovely morning for riding? Come, Kendall."

Dan watched her, hypnotized, until she disappeared in the bank.

"I wonder—if I'd ever let her know—hell! Too late now," he murmured. "I'd no business to with things goin' on the rocks like this."

The next moment he was on Pinto's back galloping madly out of town toward the open range, as if to escape from something that was gnawing at his heart.

Dan didn't go near his ranch that day. Till late afternoon he alternately raced Pinto over the hills and sat in a brown study in the motionless saddle, his eyes fixed on the rolling country.

For over an hour during the mid afternoon, he lay on his face at the top of a cliff overlooking the turbulent Wind River at the point where it took a sharp turn just back of the low divide, separating it from the valley in which King City lay.

This was one of Dan King's favorite haunts. Many a dreamy hour he had spent there in the last few years.

This time his communion with the river seemed to hearten him again. It was toward five o'clock when he suddenly leaped to his feet and whistled to Pinto, who was grazing near by.

"Pinto, ol' dear, they haven't got us licked yet," he remarked aloud as he mounted the pony and there was new purpose in the steady gallop that brought him back to the ranch house by sunset.

Jed Perkins, the foreman, hailed him as he came in.

"There was an old party named Thomas all over the place this afternoon," he said. "Came in a car with three other dudes and

acted like they owned the ranch. Cook says they even went through the house; told him he'd seen you and it was all right."

"The damned old brawler!" Dan snorted instantly in a hot rage. "We'll see whether he owns the ranch or not!"

Dan ate little supper that night. Rage had destroyed his appetite. In his room, he wrote a long letter and then, routing out a fresh pony, rode down to the city to mail it.

On the steps of the post office, he bumped into C. K. Thomas.

"Just the man I want to see!" exclaimed the Easterner. "Look here, young man, let's go somewhere where we can sit down quietly. I want to talk turkey to you."

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Thomas," Dan drawled coolly, though he was boiling within, "turkey is a kind of bird language I'm not up on a whole lot. But turkey bein' an outdoor bird, I reckon here's as good a place to talk it as any."

"Humph! Suit yourself. Here's what I'll do for you. I've had some outside appraisers over your place to-day. They set the same price on it that Mr. Mosier seems to think is right. I'll buy you out, lock, stock, and barrel, for fifty thousand dollars. Take it or leave it."

"It's left right where it starts," Dan answered promptly, and turned away.

Thomas put a detaining hand on his arm.

"Hold on a minute. Just for the sake of curiosity, what would you take for it?"

"Just what I said I'd take the other day—nothing."

"Now look here. I want to be liberal. I don't have to haggle over anything I want. Money's no object. My boy's going to stay in this country and I'll be here a lot myself. I don't want anybody to say I haven't done the handsome thing by the last of the Kings. I'll make it sixty thousand dollars."

But Dan was on his way.

"Not interested!" he snapped over his shoulder.

II.

DURING the following week, C. K. Thomas nearly died of apoplexy, from going through the experience for the first time

in his life of running up against some one whom his money couldn't buy. News of this leaked out around town presently, to the great glee of a considerable number of King City business men, to whom the arrogant Thomas had by no means endeared himself during the last month.

The Easterner at first stood firmly by his sixty thousand dollar offer. This he reiterated more and more insistently each time he met Dan King. But presently he began to note the attitude of covert elation around town at his bafflement, and he threw judgment to the winds.

One day he rode out to the King ranch and found Dan King on the sunny side of the bunk house mending some fishing tackle.

"Look here, young man, I'm through fooling with you. I am going to have this ranch whatever I have to pay for it. And now go ahead with your holdup work. How much is it?"

"Same price as before," Dan drawled without looking up from his rod. "That is to say—nothing."

"I'll give you seventy-five thousand dollars."

"It ought to be good fishing weather," Dan remarked, cocking his eye at the sky.

"Not a cent over eighty thousand dollars. That's final."

"Appears like we never did get any rain any more around here," Dan intoned mournfully.

"Would one hundred thousand dollars interest you?"

Dan picked up the rod, slipped it in his case and rose to his feet.

"I shore enjoy listening to your music, Mr. Thomas," he commented, "but if you'll excuse me, I got some important fish to catch this afternoon."

"That offer of one hundred thousand dollars will stand for just two weeks, young man," Thomas roared after him. "Then I'm through trying to be liberal with you. I wouldn't be making such a fool of myself as this if it weren't for my boy. He seems to have reasons of his own for wanting to be particularly liberal with you. But at the end of two weeks, if you haven't taken up this offer, the price drops to thirty

thousand dollars and stays there, and I am in a position to know that before many months, you'll be glad to take it. Good day, sir."

"Don't go unless you want to," was Dan's only comment as they parted.

"Now, just what did he mean by all that?" Dan King asked himself, not quite so unperturbed within as he had appeared outwardly. "Why does his boy want to be liberal with me, and why the thirty thousand dollar figure?"

Dan knew without stopping to figure up again that thirty thousand dollars represented the total of notes, mortgages, and interest due to date. He inferred that Thomas had been snooping around and had a pretty clear line on his affairs. Was old Seth Mosier playing fair, he wondered?

But whatever Dan King's misgivings, he displayed none of them around King City. Nor did he seem to take the two weeks ultimatum seriously. In fact, for the next three weeks nearly, he was not in evidence around the city or the ranch.

Jed Perkins reported that he and a party of dudes from the East had gone on a fishing trip up the Wind River. The rumor went around town that Dan King was going to turn his place into a dude-ranch, but Seth Mosier, when consulted by the gossips, was of the opinion that the young man would not have made any such move without consulting him.

III.

THE day after the termination of the two weeks of grace Thomas had granted, the Easterner was ushered again into the office of President Mosier of the bank.

"Well," he announced. "I've come to put the screws on young King finally. I understand you hold notes and mortgages here totalling thirty thousand dollars, and all payable in the fall."

"That's about right," admitted Mosier.

"I'll take them off your hands for their face value, and foreclose on him."

The eyebrows of Seth Mosier raised slightly.

"So, when you couldn't get the place for one hundred thousand dollars, you decided

to get it for thirty thousand dollars, did you?" said the banker dryly.

"Well, why not?" asked Thomas. "I'd rather pay the young man one hundred thousand dollars for the sake of the feeling in the community, but I have done all I can in that direction."

"Well, Mr. Thomas, I think my own feelings are worth something, too, if I am going to sell out my old friend's son. If you were willing to pay one hundred thousand dollars directly for the place yesterday, you will pay one hundred thousand dollars to-day for the papers that will get you the property."

"What!" roared Thomas.

For a long moment they locked glances. Seth Mosier's gray eyes were cold as steel now. Finally, the gaze of Thomas wavered and fell.

"You win," he surrendered. "It's a piece of outrageous highway robbery, but I said money was no object, and I made up my mind to get this place and I'm going to get it. I'll meet these terms on one condition, though. I understand that the rest of the original King ranch is in your hands, having been taken over by you from time to time on mortgages. If my boy is going to ride in the saddle of Bronco King, as you say, I want him to be proprietor of all the land that King once ruled. I'll buy the rest of that land from you at a reasonable price, and give the whole thing to the boy as a wedding present."

"I think I can suggest a better arrangement," Mosier demurred, his eyes twinkling now. "I want to do my share of this wedding present thing, as long as it won't cost me anything. You are paying me a bonus of seventy thousand dollars on this mortgage and these notes. That sum is just about what it cost me to take over my holdings in the original King ranch through loans that I had made on mortgages that I had to foreclose. So you see, I can afford to make a wedding present of that extra land as long as you are paying for it. So you'll take over the present ranch and ranch house, and deed that to the boy, and I'll deed the rest of the old King property to my girl as a wedding present. So when they marry, the old King ranch will be re-

stored to one ownership. Now what could be fairer than that?"

Thomas laughed uproariously at this suggestion.

"You Connecticut Yankees always were liberal with other people's money," he chuckled. "All right, I'll agree."

In the next few days this arrangement was completed. One evening, when Seth Mosier came home to supper, he handed his daughter a sealed manila envelope. It contained a deed to the old long-detached King property.

"Wedding present for you, Sally. Not to be opened till after the ceremony."

Two days later, Dan King returned from his camping trip up the Wind River, and his dude guests departed homeward. Those who met Dan that day in King City were puzzled to note that Dan seemed to be in nowise downcast over his situation. Rumor had outlined it to the town pretty well by now.

"Not much like old Bronco, lying down and letting himself be licked like that," was a frequent remark when Dan was the subject of conversation.

But Dan carried with him a baffling air of cool confidence. In fact, he was one of the last to hear of the coup Thomas had put over with Mosier's aid.

When finally some one cautiously asked him about it, he laughed at it as a joke at first, then hurried to Mosier to inquire about the matter.

Dan sat in a daze too surprised at Mosier's perfidy to speak, while the banker was calmly making his confession.

"So you see, Dan, I saw you were lying down on the job and were going to let the place go anyway. I didn't want to have the dirty job of foreclosing myself. Here was a chance to keep the old place sort of in the family. Sally will have it when she's married, you know. I am doing it really on her account. She's always greatly admired that old house of yours."

Dan started violently.

"Did Sally ask you to do this?" he asked faintly.

"Oh, no, Sally knows nothing about it yet."

For a long time Dan King sat in silence

eying the floor. Finally he straightened up slowly.

"All right," he sighed. "If Sally wants it, that's different. It's all right. I got no kick coming. I'm through."

Dan went out, and on his way home stopped at the telegraph office, where he canceled an important engagement in New York that he had made the previous week, then he rode disconsolately home.

Never had the old ranch house seemed so dear to him as it did now. And Sally was going to live there some day with another man. Well, that's what she wanted.

There was no one in sight around the place when he rode up. He turned Pinto into the corral, and entered the silent house. He threw himself on the lounge in a little den at the end of the main hall, which was his favorite loafing place when he wanted to indulge in any dreaming.

Some time later he heard voices in the hall.

"But, Kendall, we mustn't come in like this when there's nobody home! What would they think of us if they found us prowling around?" It was the voice of Sally Mosier.

"I'll tell you why it's all right, sweetheart," Dan heard her fiancé assure her. "I've a little surprise for you. I wanted to keep it secret longer, but we've got to begin to arrange the furnishing. This house is going to be yours. Here's where you are going to live. I heard you admired it so much that dad's getting it for us."

Dan heard a little gasp from Sally.

"Why, Kendall, what do you mean? Is Dan King selling it?"

"Uh—yes. Dad takes it over and gives us the deed. Isn't that fine?"

But Sally did not answer.

"Why, darling, what's the matter? Don't you love the old place after all?"

"Yes—oh, yes—but—but—oh, Kendall, I'm sorry to seem ungrateful, but I can't ever live here. I just can't."

Suddenly she burst into hysterical weeping.

Dan King slipped quietly out the back way unobserved. He strolled slowly down toward the corral, head bent in deep thought.

"I wonder. - I wonder," he kept saying to himself. "Would it have been different if I hadn't been afraid to speak? Well, anyhow, if Sally doesn't want the old house after all, she doesn't have to have it."

He waited behind the bunk house till he heard the young couple drive away, then he called Pinto from the corral, and a few minutes later was racing back to King City. At the telegraph office he wired New York again:

Disregard previous telegram. Will be there as agreed.

Dan King did not return to the ranch for some weeks. All the gossips around King City knew was that the had gone to New York, but what he was doing there was only vaguely surmised.

Meantime, the arrangements for the wedding of Kendall Thomas and Sally Mosier proceeded, although nothing more was said for the time being about the furnishing of the King ranch house. C. K. Thomas, Sr., returned to King City after a trip East in time to attend to the King foreclosure and be present at the wedding of the son which was to take place soon afterward.

On the morning of the day when the time limit for the payment of the mortgage on the ranch expired, Dan King was still absent. The two Thomases arrived and gathered with Mosier in his private office. Wallace Horton, the bank's attorney, was present with the necessary legal documents.

"I've heard nothing from Mr. King," said Mosier, "though he has acknowledged the due and proper legal notices sent by registered letter. I take it for granted that he has not been able to raise any money to meet this mortgage or these notes. I did not expect he would. We might just as well go ahead with the proceedings."

A new deed and other papers were presented for inspection and approval, and were all ready for the final signatures at five minutes to the fatal hour when Dan King would cease to be the owner of the King ranch.

And at that moment Dan King walked in. His manner was cool. In a leisurely way he drew a certified check from his pocket.

"There you are, Mr. Thomas. I think

you'll find that this covers the face value of that mortgage and those notes which you hold, together with interest in full. Sorry I can't see my way clear to pay you the same figure you gave for them when you bought them, but then you had your fun doing it, I hope."

There was dead silence in the room following this announcement. For some moments the other members of the party were seriously concerned for fear C. K. Thomas might have a stroke of apoplexy.

Seth Mosier broke the silence finally with a most unusual display of feeling.

He stepped over and clapped Dan King on the shoulder.

"Dan, my boy, I hoped you'd do this. But I knew you'd have to be jolted into it. How in blazes did you do it—strike a gold mine?"

"I did it by dreaming over on the Wind River when I ought to have been herd-riding my broncos, as you said, Mr. Mosier. I've known as long as you have that this country was done so far as stock-raising goes. I knew that all this land around here that's good for nothing but grazing a part of the year, would make good dirt-farming with proper irrigation.

"I've been studying irrigation while I've been dreaming. I saw a way to bring the Wind River through the Divide, and I brought some engineers out here and proved I was right. Last week I got my scheme adopted by some New York capitalists, and they advanced me the money to hold my title to the ranch, which happens to occupy a key position in the irrigation scheme."

C. K. Thomas proved to be a good loser after all.

"By gad, I take off my hat to you, young man, if you did make me throw away seventy thousand dollars and beat me out of a property I had my heart set on."

"You haven't any kick coming," Seth Mosier pointed out, "that seventy thousand dollar bonus, remember, comes right back into your family in the way of a wedding present of the rest of the King ranch, which, as I figure it, under dirt farming, will be worth about ten times what it is now."

"Unfortunately, sir," dryly announced Thomas, "those acres do not revert to my family inasmuch as my son informed me this morning that he had just received a letter from your daughter breaking her engagement to him. Evidently, you didn't know that yet. So the Thomas family loses out all along the line."

But Dan King had leaped excitedly to his feet at this.

"May I see you a minute outside, Mr. Mosier?" he asked.

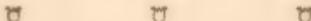
In the hall outside the door, he turned on Seth Mosier almost fiercely.

"Is Sally home?" he demanded.

Seth Mosier actually chuckled.

"Yes, Sally's home. And she's got the title to the rest of old Bronco King's kingdom tucked away in her bureau drawer and unless her old dad's greatly mistaken, she's waiting for some one to come and claim it, some one that I reckon has learned at last how to properly ride in the saddle of Bronco King!"

THE END



METTLE

THE quick little beat of the gay little heart,
The struggle to love and the struggle to part,
The proud little smile and the brave little song
When heaven's a guess and the world is all wrong!

Jane Burr



When a Turkey's an Elephant

By JOHN H. THOMPSON

"NUMBER 1805 wins the fifteen-pound turkey!" shouted the man behind the packing case counter as the wheel clicked around and slowly came to a stop.

Bill and I eagerly peered at the number on our ticket.

"Hooray, we win! The turkey's ours!" I exclaimed.

We pushed forward through the crowd and claimed our prize.

"Luck is with you this afternoon, gentlemen. Better take a chance on the next bird," wheedled the man behind the packing case.

But Bill and I knew enough about the game to quit at the proper time. We were satisfied.

We had strayed into the place in the midst of the holiday-eve raffle, and on the spur of the moment had staked one of our three dimes on a ticket.

We figured that if we won we would have

a regular old-fashioned holiday feed, and if we lost we still would have enough left to buy two bowls of soup.

Lady Luck smiled on us, and we drew number 1805.

Lugging the big wooden crate in which the turkey was strutting proudly around, Bill and I marched out of the place with envious eyes focused upon us.

We had visions of white meat and dark meat with dressing and gravy. As we set the heavy crate down on the sidewalk outside to rest for a minute, however, we suddenly realized that there were a few formalities necessary to convert a feathered giant strutting about in a crate into a nicely browned delicacy lying on a platter with luscious drumsticks mutely raised heavenward.

I wouldn't kill a turkey or a chicken myself, and I knew that Bill was too tender-hearted to do it. Furthermore, neither of us knew anything about taking the out-

sides off or the insides out and otherwise preparing a bird for the great rite of feasting.

"Now that we got the blooming thing, what'll we do with it?" I asked hopelessly as we surveyed our regal prisoner. I was beginning to wonder if, after all, Lady Luck wasn't a hoodoo masquerading in skirts.

"That's what I was wondering," admitted Bill. "We can't eat it alive."

We debated the problem from various angles, and finally decided that the only thing to do was to sell the turkey. We luggered the crate down the street to a meat market, but the proprietor laughed at us when we asked him if he wanted to buy a turkey.

"I've got a dozen here I'd like to sell myself at half price before closing time," he informed us.

We tried another market, with like result. At the third place we offered to swap the live turkey for one half its size dressed and cleaned.

When this offer failed to arouse enthusiasm we tried to get a few links of frankfurters, but it seemed that the turkey market was clogged to capacity.

Taking up our burden, we next tried a restaurant, but met with no better luck there. The proprietor had stocked up on everything for the holiday and would not even give us a couple of square meals for it unless we would kill and dress it.

After another conference of war, Bill stayed with the crate, while I went back to the raffle place and tried to pick up a customer. Everybody in the crowd was so certain he would win a turkey before the evening was over, however, that there was no market for an outright sale.

The only man that showed any interest had spent ten dollars on chances and had only fifty cents left. When I eagerly offered to sell him a fifteen-pound turkey for half a dollar he lost all desire to buy it and was curious only to learn what it was dying of.

I mournfully returned to Bill and broke the sad news.

Not knowing what else to do, we luggered the turkey to the abandoned shack on the

outskirts of the village where we had been making our headquarters since we hit the burg the day before.

The crate was awkward to carry, because every time the turkey moved—and it was constantly moving—the entire outfit would tip. Again and again we stumbled over ruts in the darkness, after we got beyond the lighted district. We were all in by the time we finally reached the shack and set the load down.

A last-minute inspiration on Bill's part sent us stumbling down the road for half a mile to the nearest farmhouse, to open negotiations with a farmer to kill and dress the turkey for us. The farmer, however, became so suspicious that we finally told him to "never mind," and started back to the shack.

As we went out of the yard we saw the farmer emerge hurriedly from the house with a lantern and head for his poultry run. Loud squawks breaking the stillness of the night proclaimed to us that he was taking an inventory.

Our vision of a bounteous holiday feast was going a-glimmering. We had reached the stage where we would gladly have given the turkey away, but wouldn't dare offer it to anybody for fear we would land in the lockup.

If Bill and I hadn't been so tender-hearted, we might have considered abandoning the turkey and letting it starve to death.

What to do with it? That was the problem. We couldn't eat it, we couldn't sell it, we couldn't swap it, we couldn't give it away, and we couldn't leave it to starve. That turkey had proved a white elephant indeed. It was about as useful to us as a six-burner gas heater to a man doing a balancing act on the equator. We were wishing we had our dime back.

I dreamed about groaning banquet tables all night, and I guess Bill did likewise, for he rolled out in the morning with fire in his eyes and announced that he was going to kill the turkey. He went so far as to start prying off one of the slats of the crate, but remembered that we didn't have any ax.

We warmed over some dregs in the coffee-pot for our breakfast, but it was such a

slim breakfast that long before the sun was overhead hunger was gnawing at us. A turkey dinner would have found a hearty welcome in the shack. Even a plate of cold hash would have been as welcome as a millionaire philanthropist at the headquarters of a hospital building fund drive.

"It's time to blow in our twenty cents for a couple of bowls of soup," I suggested when my endurance had reached a limit.

Bill didn't put up any remonstrance. We started at once for the village, leaving Mr. Turkey gobbling in his crate.

We were almost exceeding the speed limit as we swung up the main street and headed toward the restaurant.

Suddenly Bill stopped dead in his tracks.

"What'll the gol-dinged turkey have to eat?" he ejaculated.

"That's the least of my worries just now," I said cheerfully. A vision of the steaming bowl of soup was before me.

"We can't go in there and lap up soup, with the poor turkey starving in his crate back there at the shack," protested Bill.

I saw our soup dinner vanishing the same way the turkey dinner had gone.

Bill stood there and argued so eloquently for the turkey that no man with humane principles could have resisted him.

Five minutes later, soupless and more hungry than ever, we were headed back to

the shack with a package of corn meal which we had bought at a little grocery store, the feed mill having been closed for the holiday.

We had to blow our entire twenty cents for it. I almost wept as we shoved the money over the counter.

"I would rather wring that turkey's neck than feed it," I ejaculated vehemently as we hove in sight of the shack.

"I wish you would," said Bill. "Wring its neck, I mean," he added.

"Holy mackerel!" I exclaimed, pointing into the yard. There stood the empty crate.

We made a hurried investigation. There were heavy footprints near by. Several of the slats had been broken off.

"Somebody stole our turkey," said Bill.

The remark was as superfluous as a summer fur piece on the neck of a flapper.

Without further ado, Bill started prying slats off the empty crate and breaking them under foot.

"What's the idea?" I queried.

Bill had picked up the pieces of wood and entered the shack. I followed him inside.

"It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good," he remarked cheerfully, stuffing the wood into the broken grate and stirring the corn meal into the half-filled water can on top of the stove.

THE END



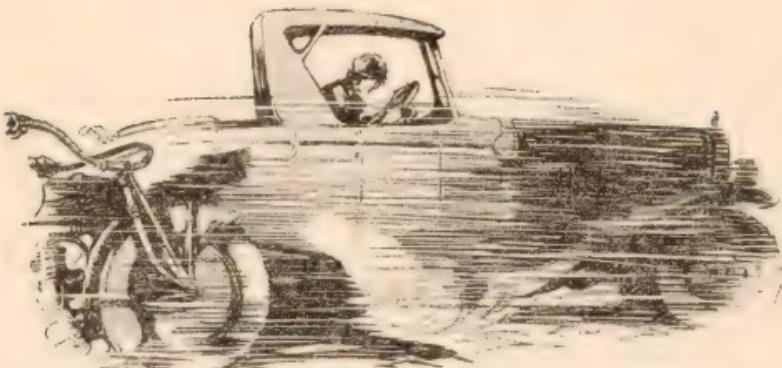
SEA VOICES

I WALKED on the shore in that silent hour,
When the shadows pale and the night is gone,
When the east lifts up like a flaming flower
And the sea is red with the coming dawn.

I hearkened the song that the waves were singing,
The song that the waters have ever sung
To the white sea-sands and the gulls up-winging.
Since that distant dawn when the earth was young.

There on the sands as the day was wakening,
As the rainbow mists went drifting by,
A glad new dawn in my heart was breaking
In the beauty of earth and sea and sky.

Edgar Daniel Kramer



Ten Minutes for Tea

By HELEN A. HOLDEN

"OUR grandmother warned me that I would live to regret the day I married you." The napkin made a try for the table, but slipped to the floor as Keith James rose angrily from his chair.

"Not being warned, I had to learn from sad experience," Peggy shot back at her husband's retreating figure.

She sat there at the table, angry eyes fixed on the half empty plate across from her. A bang as the door closed warned her that her equally irate lord and master had left the house.

Quick tears came to her eyes. It was so unfair. Grandmother Yarnal had said it because she, Peggy, had been so wild. She never suspected that Peggy would settle down to be a stolid, model housewife.

Peggy had always taken things hard. As a flapper she had gone the limit. When she married she gave up flapperish things and had gone into Domestic Science with capital letters. She attended classes instead of card parties. Cook books took the place of the latest fiction. She prided herself that she had gone far toward becoming an authority along this new line.

Instead of being proud of his new chef,

however, Keith soon took her for granted. Then things had gone from bad to worse and he had openly found fault.

With a wistful air Peggy would sit through a meal that had taken her a good part of the afternoon to prepare. But she waited in vain for some word of praise or even appreciation.

Lately the former silence had been broken by irritable faultfinding. That very morning he had quite broken her heart by pushing aside his baked apple after a couple of spoonfuls. He had merely looked at the plate of muffins she had dragged herself from bed a half hour earlier than usual to bake.

Then he had returned a scornful eye to the baked apple and remarked:

"Just give me a raw apple for breakfast to-morrow if you don't mind."

The apple had been decorated internally with whipped cream and raisins and externally with halved almonds. It had required time and patience to achieve.

"If Keith had taken all that trouble for me I would have eaten a piece of rhinoceros with relish," thought Peggy, but she refrained from saying it aloud.

"You must have heard, but I suppose it is not worth your while to answer," continued Keith. "If you only knew how pleasant it is to sit opposite some one as responsive as a piece of dough—"

But he got no further, for Peggy hastened to assure him that there were plenty of places he could go if he felt that way. More had followed till he had made that unnecessary remark about her Grandmother Yarnal.

It was as if several weeks had been consumed in getting ready to lay the fuse. Then suddenly a spark had been applied. The explosion was inevitable and overwhelming.

Peggy winked back the tears and anger again overcame her. It certainly was unfair to taunt her with Grandmother Yarnal's remark that had been meant so differently.

She gathered up the uneaten apple, carried it to the kitchen and took solid pleasure in dumping it in the scrap heap. Then she reached for the muffins—nice golden-brown, crispy affairs, and they joined the discard.

As she set the apartment to rights, Peggy rehearsed the situation from beginning to end—then back again. She was hurt and angry and bewildered. Warned by Grandmother Yarnal at the time of her marriage she had given up the things judged harmful. She had devoted herself heart and soul to making a home. And what a home!

Her husband had taken up with a crowd who were impossible to her. She had no feeling of superiority, but there was simply nothing in common between their ideas and hers. So lately Keith had been going his way while she stayed more and more at home. And the only thing left her was her pride in its being a well regulated household.

"I wish Grandmother Yarnal had minded her own business." It was not a respectable wish of Peggy's, but the conditions under which she was struggling were unusual. "If Keith is going to regret the day he married me I might as well give him a peg on which to hang his grievance. He needn't think I enjoy this existence any more than he does, by jimminy!"

Besides an income from Grandmother Yarnal's inheritance, she had a neat little bank account. Doing her own housework she had been able to put aside quite a sum from each week's allowance. It would be enough to make things hum for at least one day. After that, perhaps the deluge.

She had given up her car soon after her marriage. Two cars seemed superfluous. She had no time for idle driving. When it was necessary she went with Keith.

She called up the firm that had been proud of her premarital exploits. They gave her every advantage possible to enter the auto field again. An initial sum was soon settled on for the new roadster with easy monthly payments.

She called up Camilla Jordan, her best friend, who lived in the city. Camilla was sorry, but she had an appointment to meet Gladys Miller.

"So much the better," sang Peggy. "Bring Gladys along. Meet me at the Roosevelt at eleven sharp. We'll have some day!"

In an incredibly short time, arrayed in her best bib and tucker, Peggy was skimming swiftly over the road that connected her home town with New York. It was good to feel the sensitive new roadster respond to every whim of hers. She had forgotten what fun it was to drive. How the trees and houses flew by!

She almost stopped, then swerved suddenly to avoid a dog that crossed the road in front of her. Then she sang a song of triumph as the car picked up speed and carried her without a struggle to the top of a steep hill.

She wished Keith could have seen her climb. The thought brought back all their recent unpleasantness. So Keith regretted the day he married her! Once more anger gleamed in her eyes as she assured herself that she would do her best to give him something worth while to regret.

A flying glimpse of a bank yellow with goldenrod. She stopped as quickly as possible and backed till she came opposite the graceful, feathery plumes. Knowing that a bit of the country is invariably welcome in the city, Peggy got out and picked a large spray.

Back in the car again she realized that she had need to make time if she was to be punctual for her appointment. Once she struck town it would be slow going.

The car shot ahead as if only too glad to show what it could do. Peggy felt as if she had suddenly acquired a pair of wings.

She sang out loud for sheer joy. Anger gave place to stubborn determination. For months she had been in prison. What piffle were baked apples compared with banks of purple asters and goldenrod!

On passing a crossroad she glimpsed a traffic cop standing by his motor cycle. Then she knew instinctively that he was after her.

A race! Nothing could have suited her mood better.

Along the road sped the new roadster. Behind it sped the motor cycle. They were nearing the city now and it took careful driving to avoid the increased traffic. In her present mood, Peggy exulted in the extra hazard.

Then an idea occurred to her. Why not get arrested? Speeding was not a very serious offense, but it would be something real for Keith to regret. At least, it would be written up in the papers; she would see to that. She chuckled as she thought how Keith would hate it.

Imperceptibly she slowed down. Soon the motor cycle must overtake her. She hoped the policeman would not be good natured.

A shadow on the road was followed immediately by the motor cycle. Peggy jammed on the brake. The motor cycle shot ahead.

"Some momentum," decided Peggy.

A keen glance at the figure ahead and Peggy was conscious of overwhelming disappointment. The man was some sort of a messenger, a delivery boy in uniform, not a policeman at all.

It was too bad, but it couldn't be helped. Peggy started up the car and was soon threading her way down the crowded streets of New York.

II.

It had been a strenuous day, but as Peggy reflected bitterly there had been

nothing to justify Grandmother Yarnal's warning. Why hadn't she been able to find something to do that would give Keith a real reason for his grievance?

There had been the shops, luncheon, and a matinée. They had left Gladys at her apartment hotel. Now Peggy was on her way farther uptown with Camilla.

Then at Seventy-Second Street she got in a bad jam.

"What time do you expect Tom home?" Tom was Camilla's husband. Peggy honked impatiently for a big van to move on out of her way.

"He doesn't get home till late, so I have plenty of time," replied Camilla, then added enthusiastically. "It has been a perfect day—wish we could have more of them."

"The more the merrier," answered Peggy.

"Do you mean that?" Camilla looked at her companion curiously.

"Why not?" asked Peggy.

"You see," Camilla hesitated, then made up her mind to have it out, "Keith told Tom that you had given up all things frivolous. He said that when he came home at night, full of what had been happening, you couldn't think of anything but whether the pickles were sour enough or the dessert properly sweet. What's the matter with Keith, Peggy? It's a shame for him to misrepresent things that way. To-day proves that you are just the same old Peggy that you were before you were married."

"Now, that's funny," drawled Peggy ironically, "all the time I've been flattering myself that I'd improved."

She was glad that they had reached Camilla's apartment so that there was no time to pursue the embarrassing subject.

Hastily she assured Camilla that she did not bear her any ill will for the very valuable information she had just conveyed and that they would have another day of festivities soon. She was glad Camilla thought she hadn't changed and she must be getting along home.

It was a very thoughtful Peggy who drove slowly along the road over which she had raced that morning. Her anger having burned itself out early in the day, Camilla's chance words refused to be ignored. They

chased through her brain, making her see things in an entirely new light.

She remembered the day she had first made eclairs. Not so long ago either. It had taken practically all afternoon.

She had mixed them carefully and baked them in breathless silence. When they came from the oven, all nicely puffed and brown, she had split and filled them with whipped cream mixed with fruit and nuts. Then a professional coating of chocolate had given a finishing touch.

She brought them on for dessert and proudly but silently served them, conscious that she had achieved a masterpiece. Keith would wonder where she had connected with such wonderful delicacies unless she had brought them out from the city.

At last, unable to stand his silence any longer, she had remarked, quite casually: "Not bad, are they?"

Keith had looked up absentmindedly: "What?—oh, these—the cream isn't a bit sour, is it?"

It was a blow. But now, looking at it from the other side, perhaps she had been as big a failure as her unresponsive husband.

Now she came to think of it, she distinctly remembered that that very same night Keith had pushed back his chair from the table with an exhausted sigh. His remark that he had gone through a nerve racking ordeal at the office she had stubbornly refused to follow up. If he wasn't interested in her household affairs, why should she show interest in his business?

Now, after a day away from household cares, her attitude seemed pitifully small. That Keith had been as anxious for sympathy from her as she was for sympathy from him had been lost sight of in fierce resentment. And his work was real and serious, while hers was merely a fad.

And, being honest with herself, she was suddenly very humble.

Why, any poor dub could cook. An idiot could follow a few rules and achieve satisfactory results. Just because it had all been new to her she thought she was doing something exceptional.

Hundreds of women were doing it as a matter of course. She might just as well

have sulked and grown peevish because Keith had not placed a laurel wreath on her brow when she made up bed in some princely fashion.

Having once begun, she did not spare herself. All she asked of fate was to give her another chance.

She quickened her pace. She was now in a fever to get home. Instead of French fried potatoes served with a gloomy frown, she could hardly wait to try the result of plain boiled ones offered with a merry smile.

It was growing dark as she came in sight of the house. Greatly to her surprise, it stood a black shadow in the gathering gloom. No welcoming light shone from it anywhere.

Peggy knew she was late. Keith should have reached home quite some time earlier.

As she drew near she looked for his car where he always parked it. But it was nowhere along the curb. This was strange; he never put it in the garage till after dinner.

Architect for a big concern in the city, he was busy just now overseeing the reconstruction of a large country house two miles farther out in the country. There were also several houses he had planned now going up on the main street of their town. He usually visited one or the other—sometimes both of the places—after eating his dinner.

Carefully leaving Keith his usual parking space, Peggy jumped from her new roadster and hastened up the path to the house. A sudden feeling of fear began tugging at her heart.

Why was Keith's car missing from its customary place? Why was the house so dark and grim?

She was afraid to answer these questions. She put out a hand to steady herself after turning the key in the lock.

III.

PEGGY was all alone in the world, with the exception of very distant cousins. Grandmother Yarnal had been the last of her immediate family. If Keith were—she did not dare finish out the thought.

As she opened the door the loud notes of

the radio reached her. It was a lively dance, the dinner music from some hotel.

Ah, Keith was entertaining some of his new friends. But why in the dark? She listened for the shuffle of feet, but all was silent except for the music.

Quickly crossing the hall, she glanced in the living room. It was dark and deserted. The music sounded uncanny, unpleasantly loud and jazzy in the empty room.

"Must have left the radio on all night." But Peggy did not take time to go in and turn it off. "Too much dissipation for one day when I was not used to it, and its making me nervous." Peggy shook herself mentally and physically as she walked quickly along the hall.

Glancing in each room in turn, she made quite sure the house was empty. It had never seemed lonely or gloomy before. She wandered slowly back along the hall wondering if she had lost her chance. Just one more, she asked of fate, and she would make good.

Then the music of the radio forced itself on her consciousness as being unbearable. She must turn it off. It was driving her wild with its insistent repetition.

She turned back to the living room. Half way across she put a quick hand over her mouth to keep back a startled scream. From the shadow of the couch she was passing rose a dark silhouette.

It couldn't be Keith. Keith would have had several lights going. She stood still, scarcely breathing.

The figure stood still. They seemed to be waiting and watching each other for an eternity.

At last, when she thought she could stand it no longer, the man spoke. Although the voice was strained and unnatural she recognized it as Keith's.

"I didn't hear you come in. I wanted all the noise I could get to drown out the cry of the children."

"There are no children," said Peggy, startled. "Let me light up and you can see—it's just I—Peggy."

"You don't know," and Keith sank to the couch with a groan.

Peggy switched on the nearest light, then glanced questioningly at her husband.

He sat bent over on the couch, elbows on knees, his head in his hands.

Peggy came quickly and sat down beside him.

"Tell me about it." There was a world of sympathy in her voice. Her chance had come more quickly than she had dared hope.

She took Keith's hands and pulled them gently away from his head. They were hot and feverish. As she held them firmly between her cool palms she was thinking rapidly.

She would humor him, then beguile him quietly to bed. At the earliest opportunity she would summon the doctor.

She reproached herself bitterly. It must be that Keith had been overworking himself lately.

"It is not so loud since you are here," continued Keith, "but before you came I thought those pitiful cries would drive me mad."

"I'm so sorry I was late in getting back." The ringing of the phone cut her off,

"They promised to call me up from the hospital," went on Keith, hoarsely. "You answer it, Peggy. I couldn't bear to hear it if it is bad news."

Quickly going to the phone, Peggy assured the voice at the other end that she was answering for Mr. James. After getting the message she repeated it, to be sure she had it right.

"The doctor says the younger boy is resting comfortable and will pull through if there are no complications; the older boy's hurts are not serious."

Then she returned to Keith and again sat beside him with new understanding of his troubles.

"There's been an accident?" she asked anxiously. "You were not hurt, Keith?"

"Haven't I told you about it yet?" groaned her husband. "I've been going over it and over it wondering if I could possibly have done anything different to prevent the thing."

He had been coming out from town early as he was very anxious to see Morris, the contractor, about the country house they were doing over. A car shot out from a crossroad on the left. It was a new car,

and the new driver lost his head. It was down grade, and he put on gas instead of the brake.

Keith tried to crowd to the other side of the road, but, as luck would have it, a trolley was passing.

The man had two youngsters in his car. The older lad was badly cut and bruised, but the younger was terribly hurt. After Keith had picked himself up—his car had been pretty badly wrecked—he had held the boy till the ambulance came. The little fellow's suffering had completely unnerved him.

The father had come off comparatively easy. The children had paid dearly for his lack of experience in driving.

"Couldn't bear to think of the little chap going out at such short notice." Keith breathed a sigh of relief at the news Peggy brought. "He was such a fine, sturdy little fellow to be snuffed out like that."

"I'm so glad they can save him," said Peggy fervently. "At the same time I'm also pleased that you came through safely. You're sure you haven't overlooked anything broken inside or out?"

"I'm sore and shaken up, of course," replied Keith, "and the car is gone, I'm afraid. I don't know what I will do either, for I must see Morris to-night. Suppose I will have to phone for a taxi."

"Taxi nothing," laughed Peggy. "There's a perfectly good little roadster sitting in front of the house right now waiting to take you over to Morris's. But, first there is the question of eating. I bet you haven't given it a thought."

Keith shuddered. "I really couldn't, Peggy. Besides, it would take an hour or two to get, wouldn't it?"

"We'll have a little fire, not because we need it, but because it's cheerful." Peggy set a match to the fire logs all ready laid. "Now you sit here with your watch in your hand and in ten minutes supper will be served."

Ten minutes! Six times ten was the shortest time she had ever accomplished it. But according to her new theory speed was necessary—speed and simplicity.

She made for the kitchen, tossing off her hat and coat *en route*. What could she do in ten minutes? Had it been a silly boast?

Five minutes later they were sitting in front of a small table pulled up in front of the open fire. On a grill Keith was happily toasting bread. On a chafing dish Peggy poached eggs to adorn the toast.

Four minutes later two steaming cups of chocolate malted milk and a bowl of sliced pineapple were placed on the table.

"One whole minute to spare," grinned Peggy as she slid into her place. To herself she added: "Not having my mind clogged with dough, so to speak, I ought to be at least mildly entertaining." Whereupon she proceeded to give Keith an amusing account of the day's happenings, carefully omitting her perturbed state of mind.

Their early morning disagreement was never referred to except in a silent and casual manner. The next day Peggy found Grandmother Yarnal's photograph turned with her face to the wall.

She accepted it as a silent apology from Keith. Grandmother Yarnal remained in disgrace for three weeks.

The supper progressed merrily. In fact it was the most successful meal Peggy had served in many a weary moon.

"Some day you had!" grinned Keith, amusedly when Peggy had finished the tale of her adventures. "But, I say, did you ever eat better toast than this? Do you see, it isn't burned a bit—just a nice even brown all over. Nothing like a good slice of toast when it is not too brown or not too pale."

"But it takes time and skill to get it just right."

"Right-o," assented Peggy vigorously, "and now I want to hear how Morris is carrying out your plans for the old Hayden place."

"I'll tell you all about that as we run out there." Keith got to his feet, holding high his cup. "And I say, Peggy, here's to the best meal we've ever had. Here's to having the same things every night till we get tired of them—and I'll make the toast."

"It's a wonderful toast," agreed Peggy, warmly.

THE READER'S VIEWPOINT

IT is too soon for the letter that follows to have been sent in as answer to the editor's request of January 29, as the issue on the stands at this writing bears date January 8, but its pertinence will be apparent in the opening paragraph.

JERSEY CITY, N. J.

Early last year I picked up a copy of your magazine and started "Six Day Glory." Well, the result was to make an ARGOSY fan of me, and now I have to buy two copies a week to keep peace in the family.

As for Westerns, give them the bum's rush. My favorite writer is Fred MacIsaac.

I will also take this opportunity to pay my tribute to the late Frank A. Munsey, as my home is in Elizabethtown, New York, where Mr. Munsey had a summer residence. He was always more of an ideal to me than any other publisher, and his career should be an inspiration to every American.

J. S. N.

ATLANTIC CITY, N. J.

Enjoyed "Moonglow" ever so much. Hope to see Coe's works in every week. All Western stories should be thrown in the waste paper basket without having the least consideration. Semi Dual stories are horrible. No more can be said of the stories of Mars and any other planet.

Let's hear from Richard Barry again. Tell Franklin and MacIsaac to write humorous stories more often. I cannot imagine who wrote "The Seal of Satan," but whoever it was he must be a regular contributor to ARGOSY as the excellence of the story warrants. Would like to hear from A. T. Locke. "Spinning the Big Top" was great, even if the hero was a Westerner. Here's hoping the Western stories are junked.

R. LE C.

KITTLE, ARK.

I have recently read with great interest and amusement the heated discussion in the back of a copy of ARGOSY. Each writer, it seems, is evidently trying to work the magazine over to suit his or her own individual taste and motives, which is going to be an enormous task no doubt. I notice in particular the tendency of most of the readers to refer to Western stories as "too much fiction." Now, doesn't that win the fur-lined bathtub? Just as much as to say that all other, "dude or white-collared," stories are more or less true. Also some tell us of their experiences as great readers, which is all right. We are all entitled to our own pet ideas, of course.

I began reading anything and everything I could get hold of, from Webster's Dictionary down to almanacs, when I was eight years old, and have been reading steadily ever since. Reading and motion pictures are my only hobbies. I was disabled in the last war—and still am—to such an extent that I have more time than anything else. I have stayed in government hospitals for months

at a time, with access to fine libraries carrying all the best books and magazines, and all my spare time was given over to reading, and is yet. I have read thoroughly all the magazines published, have spent lots of money for them, and I class myself as a critic.

Now, as to the Western stories seeming dull, absurd and ridiculous to some people who believe the great West is so tame to-day, let me suggest that they don't know the real West. I am an ex-cavalryman, border scout, ranger, rancher and puncher. I have lived in the West all my life, and I understand it, and I want to say most emphatically that there is to-day more real material and more inspiration for real, live, out-of-door "he-man" stories out West than back East, or any place else, "chain grocery stores" or elsewhere. Keep up your Westerns. I among hundreds of others buy ARGOSY ALLSTORY for its Western stories.

A WESTERNER.

RALEIGH, N. C.

I have been reading the ARGOSY since I read one copy last summer. Boy, you have one whale of a magazine. I wish you would publish more mystery, weird, and detective stories. Also scientific ones. In other words, I do not want two kinds of stories coming together in the same issue. I vote "nay" on Western stories. The covers on your magazine have made a decided change for the better. They are not as gaudy as they were.

The shorter your stories are the better I like them. Cut out five and six part stories. "Don Rando" was the only story I did not read through. After the second part it was bum. Inclosed find M. O. for two frog skins. Send me six months of the ARGOSY beginning with the January 22 issue. Yours for shorter stories,

R. B.

FROSTBURG, MD.

Interest has been growing upon me for the past few weeks as I have followed the various letters. Now, at your request, as to whether we like "first person" stories, I will write my opinion.

I have never read a first person story yet that I thought was dull. To me they are intensely interesting. I like to read about *Mme. Storey*. She excites my love of adventure. *Bella* amuses me, and, at the same time makes me feel sorry for her. She is very laughable when she confesses her fear of anything. She is refreshing. *Mme. Storey*, with her wonderfully brilliant mind, is one of the greatest characters I have ever read of. *Semi Dual* is another.

Some time back you gave us a story called "The Ghost of Gallows Hill." Now it was told

in the first person and it was highly interesting. Indeed, I was very sorry to see it end so soon. And there was no braggadocio air about it, either.

I don't want you to change your magazine. I love it for its variety. There is a story for every mood.

Please tell Richard Barry to give us another serial like "Don Rando" and "Worth Millions." Mr. Burroughs had better put off his thinking cap and trot out another "different" story. How about some more from Mars?

My dad is a railroader and he shed quite a few tears over Don Waters's "How Better Can a Man." Aren't there more railroad stories in some siding?

I have just finished "Face Value." It was great. Why is Mr. Farley so quiet? Is he, perhaps, thinking again about "The Radio Planet"? Hurry up. "War Spawn" is going to be good. I can scarcely wait for the next issue of ARGOSY.

MRS. B. W. B.

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA.

In reading your letter section of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY of December 4, I noticed a letter from H. M. K., of Endicott, New York, strongly denouncing all the Western stories that have appeared in your magazine, and four in particular—one of which was "The Hunting of Wild Gulch Wolf," by Garret Smith. I have been reading carefully all opinions of your readers—as expressed in the letters published—and I feel that more praise is due Garret Smith for his short stories in general, and particularly for "The Hunting of Wild Gulch Wolf," than has been given him. In that tale the writer combines an element of suspense with a dramatic ending in a highly satisfactory manner, but it is his descriptive powers as much as anything else that make the story more realistic than any short story that has appeared in ARGOSY for some time. It is such stories as "The Hunting of Wild Gulch Wolf" that add variety to the many other qualities of your weekly, and I think serves to make it the best fiction magazine published. Please let us have some more of Garret Smith's stories.

"Opened Eyes," by John Wilstach, was also extremely entertaining, and I am sure that many others besides myself would be delighted to hear more from him.

I think that D. S. H., in the December 4 issue, has come a lot closer to the solution than any one else.

L. A. D.

ST. PAUL, MINN.

I have been watching with interest the readers' viewpoints on Western stories, and I cannot resist the temptation. Here is mine:

I have been an almost constant reader of the ARGOSY since it was the ARGOSY. Unquestionably it is one of the finest fiction magazines on the market, but why clutter up a good magazine with a lot of Western story "bunk"? A good Western story is all right now and then, but they are hard to find. What I mean by a good Western story is

one written around facts of the "Old West." But the sort of Western stories printed in the ARGOSY and other magazines are positively disgusting. Such things simply do not happen nowadays.

I am a native of South Dakota and have spent considerable time roaming the many Western States. I know the West as it is. This wonderful country is still full of romance and excitement about which many modern stories of interest could be written, but this material is not to be found at the point of a "six-gun."

I was surprised and pleased last week when I read the short story, "Navajo," and found that it reached its climax without the aid of a "Colt forty-five" and much bloodshed. I have just finished the second installment of "War Spawn" and it certainly has the "makings" of a fine story. "Moonglow" was wonderful! C. F. Coe is to be complimented on that writing. "Personality Plus," "The Black Past," "On to Florida," "You're Under Arrest" were other good stories. Give us more of this class and "can" that wild Western stuff, unless they are stories of the old West as it used to be, or the new West as it is to-day. H. M. K., of Endicott, New York, voices my sentiments exactly—December 4. A good football, baseball, or World War story now and then would be appreciated by many. I thank you.

Yours until the ARGOSY turns Western.

H. D. R.

DAYTON, OHIO.

Read your "Moonglow" and liked it very much. I save up six copies of the ARGOSY and then finish all of the serials one after the other, and in this way get the continuity of them better. Have read the ARGOSY since 1898, and enjoy it more and more as I grow older. Will E. K. Means write another story soon? I always hunger for his.

W. S. G.

WASHINGTON, D. C.

My buddy and I read every issue of ARGOSY, and we could hardly wait for the next. We left Chicago via the blind baggage route and I missed him at Pittsburgh and don't know what has become of him. Am afraid he got hurt and is ill somewhere without a friend—I know if he is alive and has ten cents he will be reading the next issue of ARGOSY, so will you please have a heart and put this somewhere in your magazine so he will see it. I am strong, but he has T. B., and I usually made the living for the two of us. Have a good job here. His name is Arthur Griffin, and my name and address is

JOHN CASEY,
3475 14th Street, N. W., Washington, D. C.

COLFAX, WASH.

Fewer Western stories. The fewer the better. You have been printing 'way too many lately. Give us more "impossible" stories, such as "The Radio Planet" and the Tarzan stories; also the Semi Dual stories are very good.

MRS. V. G.

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